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# **Inscribing Traumatic Experience: Allusion and Satire in Poetry**

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

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# Abstract

That rape trauma is unspeakable is a damaging myth for those who experience sexual assault. The work of poets Pascale Petit, Fiona Benson, Vanessa Place and Patricia Lockwood showcases the broad range of strategies that women can employ in poetry to speak about rape and rape trauma within a rape culture. This thesis asserts that poetry is a particularly effective mode through which to express, possibly convey, and definitely inscribe the traumatic experience.

One aspect of the difficulty of speaking or writing about rape is the constraints of language, the grammatical bind of subject and object; the impossibility of the phrase “When I was raped,” as though “I” was the one actively making decisions. What makes it difficult is the bitterness of the phrases “victim” and “survivor”, particularly given these labels apply directly to the event itself, rather than the aftermath in which this thesis is interested. Thus, the use of phrases with high lexical density such as “those who have experienced rape,” or the neologism “endurer” which turns the verb into noun.

This thesis begins with reference to the body of theoretical and scientific knowledge which asserts a connection between mind, body and self in the experience of trauma, and draws attention to the social framework within which rape poetry is written. Throughout, there is a discussion of the personal biography of the studied poets, and the ways in which raped bodies speak through fragmented, figurative and imagery-rich language. In this thesis, it is not the event of rape itself that is of interest, rather the experience of subsequent trauma which seeps into the mind and body of a rape victimised woman, the wounded body.

As a literary device, the wound as metaphor for pain and trauma is well established. Chapter One extends the wound image in order to explore the distancing effect of allusion employed by Pascale Petit in *The Wounded Deer: Fourteen poems after Frida Kahlo*, and

Fiona Benson's *Vertigo & Ghost*. While Petit relies on the biographical detail of Frida Kahlo to create an analogous inscription of the experience of trauma, Benson draws on mythological allegory to convey the specific experience of rape trauma, and the fear that trauma endurers embody in the wake of such an event. In continuing the wound imagery, Petit's approach is considered comparable with the idea of the callous as there is a thick layer of hardened skin between writer and audience. In the callous approach to writing the rape experience, Petit opts for a masking of the personal, while Benson's approach is categorised as one that blisters after the burn—it is confessional. Throughout this chapter, and the thesis as a whole, there is an exploration of the ways in which poetry can mimic the disruption to temporality which is experienced during a trauma flashback, and the ways in which sensory-rich imagery is bound to any expression of the experience.

Chapter Two surveys the landscape in which we laugh at rape. From the misogynist, to the feminist, the rape joke acts a site of subversion, particularly for poets. Rape culture is explored in reference to popular culture and stand up comedy, before a critical lens is applied to a close reading of the symbolic violence inherent in the format and content of rape jokes in Vanessa Place's *You Had To Be There: Rape Jokes*. The internet, and online culture is an ever present thread in the work of Place (as this is where she drew her material from), and in Patricia Lockwood's *Rape Joke*. The ways in which rape culture at large plays into personal and individual confession or disclosure of rape is evident in the responses to Lockwood's "viral" *Rape Joke* poem, as well as in the content itself where the damaging psychological impact of victim blaming is evident. While Lockwood's tone lends itself to satirising victim blaming, it also exists within the framework whereby women who are raped are subsequently silenced and disbelieved, complicating notions of subversion and perpetuation of the patriarchy. The voice of the patriarchy is illustrated throughout Place's onslaught of hate

speech rape jokes, and a discussion of the role of the reader/listener/audience in participating in making meaning of rape culture follows.

This thesis is closed with a sequence of poems entitled *& therefore bodies*. The sequence is written from the raped body using similar techniques of allusion and humour as discussed in reference to Petit, Benson, Place and Lockwood. The techniques are employed in order to inscribe a version of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of rape. The sequence of poems seeks to speak an individual rape trauma as experienced amongst misogynistic social messaging in the context of contemporary New Zealand rape culture.

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# Introduction

*Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.*<sup>1</sup>

– ‘*The Laugh of the Medusa*’, Hélène Cixous

The mind, body and self are all connected. Rape of a woman by a man is an experience where he invades her body, and coincidingly her mind and self. In the event of rape, it is an understatement to say perpetrators harm their victims deeply; they spear the body. It is poignant to paint the event of trauma as one of violent action. While bodily imagery emphasises the violence and violation of the act, it does not do justice to those who have experienced the trauma of sexual assault. Instead, it objectifies the concept of trauma, placing it on the flesh, skin, bone of a sexualised and violated woman’s body. It is dramatic to use the visceral image of a wound to symbolise pain and bodily intrusion. However, it is also useful in conveying trauma in the written word which the body itself cannot express.

Rape happens. Rape hurts. The silence that follows is excruciating; until women find their voice. Until traumatised women learn to speak from the gut of a body that could not save them at the time of the incident; a body that reminds them of the experience – in full-body colour – into the future. Hélène Cixous, writer of *The Laugh if the Medusa*,<sup>2</sup> speaks of the historical impact of patriarchy on marginalised groups, and the power of women’s writing to convey embodied truth. Lines from the opening passage of a translation by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen open this thesis as they speak to the themes of the following pages. *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), 875-93 <[https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/stable/3173239?sid=primo&seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/stable/3173239?sid=primo&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)> [accessed 19 January 2021] (p. 875).

<sup>2</sup> Cixous.

*Laugh of the Medusa*<sup>3</sup> rejects Freud's psychoanalysis, which compares women to a dark continent.

*The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable.*—It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe it was too dark to be explorable...And we believed. They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between Medusa and the abyss.<sup>4</sup>

Hélène Cixous continues to assert the wealth of what can and will be expressed by women who are cast as 'unrepresentable', alongside death. The poets that are discussed in this thesis are testament to the strides women writers have taken since Cixous first penned these lines in 1975, contributing to social and political discourses through literature.

Cixous uses the mythology of Medusa, to shift the concept of women as weak, vulnerable, and passive to intimidating, terrifying and a threat to 'the religion of the father.'<sup>5</sup> Perseus may have beheaded the gorgon Medusa in classic Greek mythology, but in *The Laugh of the Medusa*<sup>6</sup> he is shown to pale in comparison to her power as he steps backwards towards her:

[Men] need to be afraid of us. Look at the trembling Perseus moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes. What lovely backs! Not another minute to lose. Let's get out of here.

Let's hurry: the continent is not impenetrably dark.<sup>7</sup>

Medusa rejects the narrative of heroism which surrounds Perseus (as representative of men as a collective), and encourages women to turn from the role of prey, to disallow their own beheading, and to write poetry with their bodies:

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<sup>3</sup> Cixous.

<sup>4</sup> Cixous pp. 884-885.

<sup>5</sup> Cixous p. 884.

<sup>6</sup> Cixous.

<sup>7</sup> Cixous, p. 885.

Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious, because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women.<sup>8</sup>

In this thesis, Medusa exists in the figurative application of mythology to a contemporary discussion-in-poetry of rape. The laugh alluded to in the title of Cixous' work is in the use of satire in poets presenting the topic of rape through the format or concept of the rape joke. The focal texts of this thesis are *The Wounded Deer: Fourteen poems after Frida Kahlo*,<sup>9</sup> by Pascale Petit, *Vertigo & Ghost*,<sup>10</sup> by Fiona Benson, *You Had To Be There: Rape Jokes*,<sup>11</sup> by Vanessa Place, and *Rape Joke*<sup>12</sup> by Patricia Lockwood.

Cixous places significance on the woman's body in relation to her voice. She also situates writing at the centre of the act of re-engagement with self and self-expression. In a 2017 issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*,<sup>13</sup> Jenna Brooke asks

similar questions to Cixous regarding voicing sexual bodily trauma in a patriarchal society:

How does writing become part of a process of cultivating self-trust when the world has taught you that you were wrong to believe your body ever belonged to you in the first place?<sup>14</sup>

A bodily split from the mind is an experience of repression, and denial of self. This sensation is an abstract one which sits in the skin of a raped body. Bessel van der Kolk's titular

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<sup>8</sup> Cixous, p. 879-880.

<sup>9</sup> Pascale Petit, *The Wounded Deer: Fourteen poems after Frida Kahlo* (Huddersfield: Smith/Doorstop Books, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Fiona Benson, *Vertigo & Ghost* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Vanessa Place, *You Had To Be There: Rape Jokes* (Brooklyn: powerHouse Books, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Lockwood, 'Rape Joke', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 18.4 (2017), 299-301 <<https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/full/10.1080/15240657.2017.1383737>> 299-301 [accessed 30 March 2020].

<sup>13</sup> Jenna Brooke, 'Following the Aesthetic Impulse: A Comparative Approach to a Poetics of Trauma', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 44.2 (2017), 298-316 <<https://muse-jhu.edu.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/article/661629>> [accessed 28 March 2020].

<sup>14</sup> Brooke. p. 298.

phrasing of ‘The Body Keeps the Score’<sup>15</sup> opens a text which explores the way that bodies biologically and neurologically alter in response to trauma.<sup>16</sup> Brooke asserts a similar concept:

[Traumatic] memories, contemporary psychology demonstrates, are stored in the body as well as the mind, and thus, when entering the realm of traumatic memory, it is the body that must be allowed to speak its memories, however we conceptualize or imagine the speaking to occur.<sup>17</sup>

There is an existing body of literature in trauma studies that entails discussion over the bounds and extent of expressing or communicating Trauma with a capital ‘t’. Whether or not trauma is truly representable on a philosophical level is irrelevant to the focus of this thesis, which explores poems that portray the ongoing nature of the sexual assault experience and that create vivid description of rupture and transformation – shifts, like fault lines through the self, an earthquake that rattles the body, aftershocks which ripple through time.

Writing poetry is one way to express the phenomenon of trauma. For example, in reference to literary works of trauma survivors, Brooke demonstrates that such texts ‘show that access to these memories is often complicated and expression of them is rarely linear, straightforward, and not always in our control.’<sup>18</sup> This lack of narrative linearity looks like the improbable cogent story contained by conventional structures such as acts, genre and a satisfying ending. A demand for a woman to speak about her rape experience via a comprehensible narrative is limiting, however it is not the only strategic articulation of the experience possible. The opportunity to express through poetry, for example, provides a permission to step away from meaning, from plot and sequence; a moment in which to let

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<sup>15</sup>Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma* (London: Penguin, 2014).

<sup>16</sup>van der Kolk.

<sup>17</sup>Brooke, p. 300.

<sup>18</sup>Brooke, p. 300.

words move across the page in a way which *feels* like the right tone. Brooke considers trauma memories as fitting experiences for free expression in poetry, and characterizes poetry as able to ‘create meaning from broken forms of linguistic and existential meaning.’<sup>19</sup> This idea is useful in emphasizing how, in Brooke’s words, the poem ‘allows the aesthetic discourse to represent and make manifest the broken hearts and spirits of survivors.’<sup>20</sup>

Bessel van der Kolk contributes a medical account of the physiology and neurobiology of trauma. His 2014 *The Body Keeps the Score* is primarily focused on psychopharmacological treatments of PTSD, but his core principle of psychological trauma manifesting in the body has provided a foundation for other scholars. Where poetry and philosophy provide vocabulary for discussing trauma, in medical science psychological trauma is a relatively new area of research and writing.

Micelle S. Piccolo cites van der Kolk in ‘Listening to Somatosensory States’ in *Psychoanalysis: Body, Trauma, and Poetry*, where she canvases extant literature on mind, body and consciousness or self. She refers directly to van der Kolk in the introduction, stressing ‘a body-brain-mind integrated system’<sup>21</sup> which holds ‘the impact of past environmental stressors... showing persistent consequences over time.’<sup>22</sup> Piccolo describes the body almost poetically when she states that ‘the body has the role of a sounding-board of the emotional tonalities of sensations.’<sup>23</sup> She explains that

the body “vibrates” emotionally while reading the reality and such “sensory readings” are circulated in the mind. Nowadays, this phenomenon is being studied in

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<sup>19</sup>Brooke, p. 300.

<sup>20</sup>Brooke, p. 300.

<sup>21</sup>Piccolo, Michele S., ‘Listening to Somatosensory States in Psychoanalysis: Body, Trauma, and Poetry’, *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 39.8 (2019), 557-70 <<https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/full/10.1080/07351690.2019.1671070>> [accessed 28 March 2020], p. 557.

<sup>22</sup>Piccolo, p. 557.

<sup>23</sup>Piccolo, p. 559.

Neuroscience: through neurophysiological measures we can observe how (non-conscious) sensory impressions take place before conscious feelings.<sup>24</sup>

As a psychoanalyst, Piccolo is interested in perspectives formed following Freud, and in ‘Descartes’ error’.<sup>25</sup> While she quotes van der Kolk, the two differ in that he is a psychiatrist. However, each draw on anecdotes from their practice in dealing with trauma endurers as examples for discussing the experience of verbalising trauma.

Piccolo notes a spectrum of spoken expression, from ‘very graphic visceral “hot” chronicles, to “cold” rational reports.’<sup>26</sup> She explains:

We can observe how our patients’ speech and storytelling is at times visceral and at times very aloof, or even just silent. Patients get immersed in narratives rich with visceral, corporeal, metaphorical and concrete utterances, and other times they are distant, removed, abstract, defensive or just shut down and repressed, with all the intermediate shades of gray.

On narrative she concludes that

there is a spectrum of “narratability” for stories emerging from the body in session: a wide range that goes from invisible repressed material, to barely visible removed content.<sup>27</sup>

In ‘Remapping the Event: Institutional Discourse and the Trauma of Rape’, Laura Hengehold writes with the purpose ‘to “remove” the event of rape [from the individual victim] onto some of the expert institutional discourses that shape the popular meaning of the term.’<sup>28</sup> In line with Lee Maddigan and Nancy C. Gamble’s labeling of the trial as a ‘second rape’,<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Piccolo, p. 559.

<sup>25</sup>Piccolo, p. 560, p. 566.

<sup>26</sup>Piccolo, p. 563.

<sup>27</sup>Piccolo, p. 563.

<sup>28</sup>Hengehold, Laura, ‘Remapping the Event: Institutional Discourses and the Trauma of Rape’, *Signs*, 26.1 (2000), 189-214 < [https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/stable/3175384?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/stable/3175384?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) > [accessed 28 March 2020], p. 191.

<sup>29</sup>Gamble, Nancy C. and Lee Maddigan, *The Second Rape: Society’s Continued Betrayal of the Victim* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991).

Hengehold states that ‘the rape trial is a proving ground.’<sup>30</sup> In contrast to Piccolo and Feirstein, Hengehold outlines the rigid barriers into which the speech of survivors is forced in trial and runs counter to the forms of speech in survivor speech as identified by Piccolo and Feirstein as varied, but often fragmented, and associative. Hengehold states:

The trauma to which assault survivors testify on the witness stand results as much from the popular and expert demand that an “event” have sharp contours and distinct actors and carry clear consequences, as it does from a specific event of bodily aggression in itself. In order to make sense and be credible, the survivor must explain her inexperience in a way that negotiates and compensates for the law’s restrictions on admissible evidence and the inability of psychotherapists to provide clear and normative definitions of human sexuality.<sup>31</sup>

The notion of writing as therapeutic is well established. Frederick Feirstein, in ‘Trauma and Poetry: A Psychoanalyst’s View on the Healing Power of the Arts’<sup>32</sup>, asserts the bodily grounding of any figurative expression of trauma, ‘The mind/brain has a *natural* propensity to use metaphors and dramatic techniques for self-healing after trauma.’<sup>33</sup> Feirstein, much like Piccolo and van der Kolk, is particularly interested in the recovery and healing of trauma, and is less focused on the depictions of the experience of trauma and its ability to drastically alter time and self in the wake of the incident. Feirstein contends that

Creativity has a healing power... [it is] a safe place to reexperience emotions that have been stunned into silence by making a bridge of metaphors connecting and creating distance between what we knew and felt and what we didn't want to know or feel.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Hengehold, p. 193.

<sup>31</sup>Hengehold, p. 193.

<sup>32</sup>Frederick Feirstein, ‘Trauma and Poetry: A Psychoanalyst’s View on the Healing Power of the Arts’, *Partisan Review*, 70.2 (2003), 255-61, < <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/237124997?pq-origsite=primo>> [accessed 28 March 2020], p. 255.

<sup>33</sup>Feirstein.

<sup>34</sup>Feirstein, pp. 255-256.

The grammar of the above forms of recount, as unlimited by a past tense, first person narrator, opens itself to disruptions to syntax resulting from the articulation of the experience itself. The act of retelling the event, is the incident itself, again, from then, but in now. In the act of writing the event through figurative language, there is a ‘connecting and creating’,<sup>35</sup> of distance, an oscillation between personal and impersonal, past and present.

The expressions described by Piccolo, Fierstein and van der Kolk which demonstrate a connectedness of mind and body in speaking rape, are stressed in their connection with the presumed healing process. As larger, whole texts, their writings each create an uplifting story where the act of recording the neurophysiological, or the observable behaviours and speech of individuals, is a means to a happy end, it is a modern medical fairytale. This sits in contrast to the poetry discussed in this thesis, which portrays the experience of the neurophysiological, as experienced by the “subject” in and of herself. In the work of some trauma theorists there is an uncomfortable prioritization of the medically observable perspective in discussing language surrounding trauma, which seeks to view it as a discrete event with measurable expression via concrete markers. The language of science is not an absolute authority on conveying, describing, analysing the vocabulary of trauma, nor defining its boundaries. The poetry considered in this thesis illustrates another way of understanding the pervasive and ongoing experience of trauma. Poetry allows a jumble of images to convey memory and traumatic experience. Traumatic memory is conveyed in poetry through a somatosensory vocabulary which contains the literal and figurative—an expression of the physical and psychological impacts of rape. Poetry offers significant potential for the inscribing of rape trauma.

Not all portrayals of women in the wake of trauma are as concerned with the psychology of the individual writer, as is the focal point of Piccolo and Fierstein’s work.

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<sup>35</sup> Fierstein, pp. 255-256.



Much more common are harmful stereotypes that cast the traumatised female body from the outside, observing the behaviour, without accessing the internally motivating factors which include the bodily sensation of trauma. In 'Representations of Rape in Speculative Fiction: From the Survivor's Perspective',<sup>36</sup> Suanna Davis notes the capacity of rape events in speculative fiction to allow

the authors and readers to participate in a discussion of sexual assault, looking at the concept of rape from both an outsider's point of view and that of the survivor, in ways that may differ from the typical societal representations.<sup>37</sup>

She does not cast fiction, or the speculative fiction genre, as utopian by any means, and identifies that 'self-interruption and silencing of sexual assault survivors is pervasive in life and is repeated in speculative fiction.'<sup>38</sup>

Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray's 'Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?'<sup>39</sup> holds a similar fixation on the negative representations of rape victims in the entertainment industry and emphasizes the way visual texts often languish in the sexualization of a violated body:

The media often use the presence of survivors for shock value and to pander to sadistic voyeurism among viewers, focusing on the details of the violations with close-ups of survivors' anguished expressions. They often eroticize the depictions of survivors and of sexual violence to titillate and expand their audiences.<sup>40</sup>

Alcoff and Gray outline wider historical and academic discourses which refer to Freud's seduction theory. They draw particular attention to the context whereby Freud and his

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<sup>36</sup>Suanna Davis, 'Representations of Rape in Speculative Fiction: From the Survivor's Perspective', *FemSpec* 13.2 (2013), 9-23, <<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/1462522940?pq-origsite=primo>> [accessed 28 March 2020], p.10.

<sup>37</sup>Davis, p.10.

<sup>38</sup>Davis, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup>Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, 'Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?', *Signs*, 18.2 (1993).

<sup>40</sup>Alcoff and Gray, p. 262.

contemporaries would deem that women reporting sexual assault were incorrect. Misogyny was integral to Freud's early psychoanalytical ideas about gender and sexuality. Seduction theory was the deeply troubling idea that it was instead a woman's 'simulation of sexual abuse.'<sup>41</sup> One such example is French physician Alfred Fournier who wrote that it is the

"simulators' perfidious cunning and heart rending despair of the victims [that forced him]... to denounce such monstrosities and expose them to public indignation"...The word "victim" here is being assigned to the man accused of rape. For Fournier, the accused perpetrator's speech by itself the fact that he "energetically denies it [the rape]," serves as proof of the man's innocence. Here the disclosure and speaking out by victims of sexual violence is transformed into evidence of their own pathology, while the speech of the accused perpetrator is taken as decisively or authoritative and privileged.<sup>42</sup>

This sentiment that women invent rape, and falsely accuse men exists to this day, and is as harmful as ever. Much of the poetry in this thesis discusses these ideas on a subtextual level, and allows for questions to arise regarding the impact of cultural (and literary) myth on the mind and body of a traumatized person. Alcoff and Gray conclude that disclosure and speaking out/up about instances of sexual assault 'is transformed into evidence of their own pathology, while the speech of the accused perpetrator is taken as decisively authoritative and privileged.'<sup>43</sup> This notion is explored in many of the rape jokes in *You Had To Be There*<sup>44</sup>, and is evident in subversive, feminist rape jokes as well.

Significantly, underpinned by Wilma Bucci's 'psychotherapeutic process'<sup>45</sup>, Piccolo's practice demonstrates the praxis of free association in talk therapy, and illustrates the notion

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<sup>41</sup> Alcoff and Gray, p. 273.

<sup>42</sup> Alcoff and Gray, p. 273.

<sup>43</sup> Alcoff and Gray, p. 273.

<sup>44</sup> Place.

<sup>45</sup> Piccolo, p. 560.

that to encourage free association ‘is to turn the patient into a poet unaware.’<sup>46</sup> Trauma is bodily regardless of whether the incident directly was or was not. Voicing of trauma is bodily and abstract, concrete and figurative, the language is not discrete, nor confined to one tone or style. As discussed, it is empiricism and patriarchal traditions and institutions that demand a linear narrative in the systemic processes which proclaim to seek moral law and order. Meanwhile, it is poetry that loosens enough linguistic and grammatical constraints for trauma to be inscribed.

None of the poets discussed in this thesis seek to remedy or heal as the sole function of writing. On the whole, the poets do not primarily express the healing. Rather, these poets draw on a range of text forms and literary techniques to put into words the repeated hurt and ongoing harm of the incident itself as intrinsic to its incessance in daily life. Place differs here, due to the non-personal nature of the text *You Had To Be There*,<sup>47</sup> she repeats the word ‘rape’ rather than using the experience of trauma as a motif. In her hyperbolic artistic simulations of shock comedy as a product of rape culture, Place delivers a barrage of misogynistic language which reflects popular culture comedy.

In Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorch Gunne’s Introduction to *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*,<sup>48</sup> they define their focus as ‘how to express physical violation through speaking or silence.’<sup>49</sup> They attempt to characterise rape narratives and identify that, across fiction, poetry and drama, they are ‘subversive and [employ] elliptical narrative... in dealing with rape and sexual violence.’<sup>50</sup> Brigley Thompson and Gunne consider the personal experience and context of the writer: ‘Some of these narratives

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<sup>46</sup>Piccolo, p. 560.

<sup>47</sup>Place.

<sup>48</sup>Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorch Gunne, *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, ed. by Sorch Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>49</sup>Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorch Gunne, ‘Introduction: Feminism without Borders: The Potentials and Pitfalls of Re-theorizing Rape’ in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, ed. by Sorch Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson (London: Routledge, 2009), 1-20.

<sup>50</sup>Brigley Thompson and Gunne, p. 4.

are autobiographical... but there is also room for semi autobiographical and fictional texts that create some interesting comparisons.<sup>51</sup> One chapter of *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives*,<sup>52</sup> written by Zoë Brigley Thompson, explores ideas of autobiography in relation to Petit. Chapter One of this thesis, Blister & Callous draws directly on these ideas.

Brigley Thompson and Gunne disregard the notion that rape has been made “unreadable”, categorizing this stance as one which ‘blank[s]...rape as a subject for political debate.’<sup>53</sup> *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives*<sup>54</sup> outlines a useful stance for reading expressions of rape trauma that engage with ideas of the traumatized brain, the woman’s wounded body, and sexuality. The authors position themselves (in 2009) as interested in the progression of rape discourses and the mediums in which women can speak these experiences.

For second-wave feminism the primary objective was to put rape on the agenda in an effort to prevent it from occurring. Now what is at stake is not just whether we speak about rape or not, but *how* we speak about rape and to what end.<sup>55</sup>

The question of ‘to what end,’<sup>56</sup> places a burden of social responsibility in individuals’ expression of rape experience. While this thesis is interested in the ‘*how* we speak’,<sup>57</sup> questions raised by Brigley Thompson and Gunne regarding the social significance of the end to which we speak is not of utmost concern, although it is comparable with Cixous’s assertions that to write is to take back your body,<sup>58</sup> suggesting an end. Likewise, the portrayals of healing from trauma which have the potential to shift perspectives are not of interest here. Rather, this thesis will focus on how women either speak the experience of rape

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<sup>51</sup> Brigley Thompson and Gunne, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Brigley Thompson and Gunne.

<sup>53</sup> Brigley Thompson and Gunne, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> Brigley Thompson and Gunne.

<sup>55</sup> Brigley Thompson and Gunne, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> Brigley Thompson and Gunne, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Brigley Thompson and Gunne, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Cixous.

and rape trauma through poetry, and how this form allows an apt portrayal of the non-linear, persistent experience of the event of rape as it pervades the brain's capacity to function in a linear or logical fashion.

Susan Brison claims that 'narrative does philosophical work in the aftermath of trauma, which is often both unspeakable and un-hearable',<sup>59</sup> Brison attempts to explain why it is that we conceive of such narratives as an impossibility, suggesting 'we often fail to receive trauma narratives because we fear identifying with them. Identification forces us to confront the ways we too are vulnerable.'<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Lanphier positions this philosophical approach to trauma in relation to her own discussions of Patricia Lockwood's viral poem, and draws attention to the posited vulnerability in listening to and hearing another's rape trauma. Lanphier summarises, 'This is part of her larger claim about relational ethics and a relational self: We are vulnerable and not necessarily in control or have autonomy over ourselves precisely because we are dependent on others to receive and sustain our narratives of ourselves.'<sup>61</sup> The audience reception of Lockwood's confessional poem illustrates the ways in which society responds to such narratives and attempts to speak trauma, and will be discussed in Chapter Two.

On being misrepresented as characterising rape as "unspeakable", in a "Who Speaks from the Site of Trauma?": An Interview with Cathy Caruth,'<sup>62</sup> literary scholar and trauma theorist Cathy Caruth said:

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<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Lanphier, 'The Internet as Spectator Disclosure: Consent, Community, and Responsibility in Patricia Lockwood's Viral Poem "Rape Joke"', *American Studies Journal*, 61 (2016). [n.p.], <<http://www.asjournal.org/61-2016/internet-spectator-disclosure-consent-community-responsibility-patricia-lockwoods-viral-poem-rape-joke/>> [accessed 16 April 2020], para. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Lanphier, para. 29.

<sup>61</sup> Lanphier, para. 29.

<sup>62</sup> Romain Pasquer Brochard and Ben Tam, "'Who Speaks From the Site of Trauma?': An Interview with Cathy Caruth", *Diacritics*, 47.2 (2019), 48-71 <<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/docview/2408272177?pq-origsite=primo>> [accessed 11 December 2020].

There have been a lot of debates around trauma, around whether it can be represented or not. And post-structuralist “theories” of trauma, like mine or Shoshana Felman’s, have often been reduced to or misrepresented as an argument that says that trauma – the experience of trauma – cannot be represented.<sup>63</sup>

Caruth aligns her work strongly with Freud’s, drawing attention to the theory of trauma which ‘was defined by that irreducible and somewhat enigmatic temporal structure of trauma at its heart.’<sup>64</sup> Her research is useful as it clearly outlines the ways in which temporal irregularities are innate to both the initial and ongoing experiences of trauma:

Trauma, as an experience, as a *missed* experience, causes you to ask, precisely, why it is that all the frameworks you have previously used, all the models, aren’t adequate to describe this experience. So, even a survivor saying, “I have no words for this,” doesn’t necessarily mean “I can’t represent this.” The type of reflection that goes on after traumatic events is often something like: “all the frameworks, including the frameworks of representation, are no longer adequate to this.” Which by no means suggests that I can’t find some mode of testifying; it just means that my framework for living and thinking from now on will no longer be the framework in which I lived before, whether it’s an existential issue about the meaning of life, or an issue of how I communicate my experience.<sup>65</sup>

This sense of betrayal at the hands of language is of central concern in exploring the strategies used by Pascale Petit, Fiona Benson, Vanessa Place, and Patricia Lockwood in writing rape poetry.

Chapter One explores the use of allusion in the poetic expression of the experience of rape and/or rape trauma. Initially the exploration of ideas and language use briefly surveys

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<sup>63</sup>Brochard and Tam, p. 50.

<sup>64</sup>Brochard and Tam, p. 50.

<sup>65</sup>Brochard and Tam, p. 50.

the allegorical use of a historical figure through Pascale Petit's *The Wounded Deer*,<sup>66</sup> before shifting to a focus on analogous use of mythology in *Vertigo & Ghost*,<sup>67</sup> by Fiona Benson. The mythical figure of Medusa remains as real and alive today as she was in the time of her first appearance in legend, and in 1975 when Cixious's *Le Rire de la Meduse* was published in *L'Arc*.<sup>68</sup>

Chapter Two explores the use of the rape joke format in social contexts by mimicking the non-consent of rape through the grammar of fantasy and presenting the misogynistic rhetoric of rape culture. Initially the focus is on the wider social and cultural context in which the rape joke phenomenon exists through Vanessa Place's *You Had To Be There*,<sup>69</sup> before shifting to an examination of the ways in which the rape joke phenomenon can run in parallel with the experience of rape trauma on Patricia Lockwood's *Rape Joke*<sup>70</sup> which is subversive in its use of satire and wit juxtaposed with confessionalism. Here, the monstrous gorgon that is the raped woman weaponises her own and others' laughter in order to counter rape rhetoric and inscribe the traumatic experience.

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<sup>66</sup>Petit.

<sup>67</sup>Benson.

<sup>68</sup>Cixious, p. 875.

<sup>69</sup>Place.

<sup>70</sup>Lockwood.

# Chapter One: Blister & Callous

*Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self.*

*Your body must be heard.*<sup>1</sup>

– ‘*The Laugh of the Medusa*’, *Hélène Cixous*

## Figurative Allusion as a Mode to Speak Trauma

To inscribe the experience of trauma, poets rely heavily on the use of figurative language, with meaning abstracted in order to convey the essence of the traumatic experience. Pascale Petit and Fiona Benson each use figurative language, drawing on the possibilities of symbolism, metaphor, and allusion to speak trauma. For both poets, there are times where the experience is portrayed at a remove, with distance between the personal and the page. Petit and Benson each write in a manner which is raw and confronting, vivid and confessional and in both cases, ambiguous in autobiographical detail.

Any expression which follows the sequence of events as experienced by the triggered narrator will—due to neurological factors—*naturally* be disrupted. The experience aexists in the present, and in the past simultaneously. This is a confusing experience to convey through language which normally attempts to demarcate then from now in tense structure. By employing a disrupted narrative which does not focus on a cogent linear recount of the event itself, poetry mimics the fragmentation of temporality in the ongoing lived experience of the trauma endurer.

Often configured as a wound, mental and emotional suffering (specifically as a result of physical, sexual, psychological assault and trauma) may be embodied as a tangible pain in

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous, p. 880.



order to be more directly understood through the singularly visceral bodily image of a flesh wound. In expressing the experience of a ‘mental injury’,<sup>2</sup> such as PTSD as a result of rape, poets are inevitably required to consider the ubiquitous tendency of association of trauma with physical injury, with vulnerability and weakness. In responding to the wound, if we consider trauma a burn—a hot flash of pain which lingers and throbs, eventually leaving a scar—then there are a few ways in which a poet can approach the poem about trauma.

One option for activating the symbol of the wound (within the bounds of the burn metaphor) is to consider *degrees* which could lead to damaging judgements and evaluations of incidents of trauma and is thus unfavourable. Another option could be to explore infection as a simile for shame, or amputation as representative of suppression. However, the two most useful options are the blister and the callous. The blister is the wound that the burn has made, where the skin thin, it is full and ready to burst, uncomfortable in a way that is never off your mind. When you touch it, it stings. Another is to consider the thicker skinned alternative, the callous. The callous is not a result of a burn, unfortunately for the synchronicity of the argument, however it is the result of repeated friction, perhaps representative of the constant rub of the world against the softest thin skin of the poet, perhaps what began as a blister became a callous. The idea is that beneath the callous there is sensitive skin, and once it is removed, it looks much like a healing blister with the skin peeled away. It is pinker than the rest and even the air stings.

The noun “callous” functions as an adjective, too. To be callous is to be removed and distant, unfeeling, numb. The callous metaphor provides scope for exploring poetic approaches to distance and notions of emotionality (tied closely with notions of fear and a concern for safety). The callous is visually useful for explaining the ‘layering’ strategy of

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<sup>2</sup> ACC, Injuries we cover, ACC < <https://www.acc.co.nz/im-injured/what-we-cover/injuries-we-cover/> [accessed 27 April 2020].

Petit. A callous builds up skin, layer by layer, hardening itself against a constant rubbing irritant. The callous is a shield in much the same way that a mask is, however it is born of biology, from the body that is being mistreated.

Even in disregarding social taboo and shame, writing about rape remains an emotionally difficult subject. If a poet writes in the confessional mode and draws on personal trauma it is necessary to sit with discomfort, and a reader is invited to share that space. Thus, there is a vulnerability and intimacy to writing in an explicitly confessional mode, even if the writer is able to avoid self-censorship by ignoring the societal pressure to remain silent in the wake of rape.

To counter dominant discourses regarding the “rape victim” (or the assaulted woman’s sexualised body) poets employ a variety of strategies to create or shrink distance between themselves and the inscribing of embodied trauma. Petit uses the iconography of Frida Kahlo’s biography, while Fiona Benson uses the iconography of classical Greek myth. Some suggest that Petit’s use of the narrative details of another’s trauma is an act of masking, and Zoë Brigley Thompson uses the dichotomy of the wound and the mask to discuss Pascale Petit’s poetic portrayal of the experience of sexual/ised trauma. In summary, Brigley Thompson links the motif of a wound with assault and trauma:

The symbol of the wound signifies a legacy of sexual violence in Pascale Petit’s poetry and it represents qualities of strangeness and estrangement that pursue the speaker of the poems.<sup>3</sup>

It is Petit’s poetry that is the focus of the first part of this chapter, before attention turns to Benson’s use of Greek mythology.

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<sup>3</sup> Brigley Thompson, Zoë, ‘The Wound and the Mask: Rape, Recovery and Poetry in Pascale Petit’s *The Wounded Deer: Fourteen Poems after Frida Kahlo*’, in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, ed. by Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 202/

## Pascale Petit's Frida Kahlo: The Calloused Wound in *The Wounded Deer*:

### *Fourteen poems after Frida Kahlo*

An immediate connection between a poetry collection focused on Frida Kahlo and a discussion of rape and rape trauma is not a given. At first it may seem unlikely and is therefore invisible to many readers of Petit's poetry. Petit uses Kahlo's biographical trauma as proxy for the expression of sexual/ised<sup>4</sup> trauma. There are existing readings of Kahlo's traumatic tram crash injury which compare it to sexual assault, in *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Portrait*,<sup>5</sup> by Carlos Fuentes, for example, the tram crash incident is labelled 'A Streetcar Called Rape'.<sup>6</sup>

In Petit's *The Wounded Deer*,<sup>7</sup> she explores the notion of suffering as a mode of creating art, as well as the medium—pain used as material and form for the artist (Frida Kahlo) to render herself in self-portraits. Petit demonstrates this approach to suffering and art/poetry in the question and answer: 'Isn't a lot of human experience unbearable? I find art is a wonderful release from that.'<sup>8</sup> Petit is particularly interested in Kahlo, not just because of her oft recreated tram crash trauma as an adolescent, but because she is an artist. Petit presents Kahlo as a tenacious woman whose resilience and expressive creativity allowed her to turn physical, mental and emotional pain, suffering and trauma into a portrayal of the same.

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<sup>4</sup> By sexual/ised I mean portrayals of trauma which are either non-sexual, but sexualised; or inherently sexual (and possibly sexualised). Portrayals of Kahlo's traumatic accident are sexualised, although not inherently sexual. A key element in the sexualisation of this trauma is the site of injury, the vulva (oft incorrectly referred to as the vagina - a word which is associated with the act of penetration, or sheathing.) Another is the unambiguously phallic object which caused damage. This has been coupled with ideas around her 'status' as a 'virgin', and the connotations of vulnerability and innocence.

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Fuentes, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self Portrait* (New York: Abrams, 1995)

<sup>6</sup> Fuentes, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Petit.

<sup>8</sup> Lidia Vianu, 'Your definition of Desperado poet suits me', *An Image of Contemporary Literature: 21st Century Desperado Literature*, <[http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/pascale\\_petit.htm](http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/pascale_petit.htm)> [accessed 27 March 2021].

Bodily trauma and subsequent suffering, as illustrated in the artworks of Frida Kahlo, are represented by Petit in a manner which mimics the fragmentation and disruption of linear time in the experience of the person with PTSD. Petit conveys this anachronistic experience through poetic form and the emotional connotations linked with Kahlo's iconography, and her symbolic existence within pop culture as a resilient woman. Flashback is explored, and this splitting of time—the disruption of then and now—provides vivid descriptions of the kinds of sensory detail which our minds latch on to in an experience of trauma. Much like the separation of Kahlo's brow into two in reproductions of her image, pop feminist tendencies separate their image of the icon Kahlo from her physical suffering, and political dissent.

Petit broaches the vulnerable aspects of Kahlo's biography, and harnesses these details to explore the experience of rape trauma. Free verse poetry provides a unique opportunity to simulate a trigger response in specific detail due to the disruptive possibilities of enjambment. Line breaks can shatter syntax and tense. Line breaks can ambiguate or emphasise the meaning of individual words. The double meanings of words left to punctuate lines, for example, can be puns or euphemisms. Enjambment complicates meaning and a sense of time.

In this disposal of any notion of plot, in favour of character's voices and rich sensory detail there is an avoidance of linearity which is particularly fitting in terms of inscribing and conveying the confusion of the flashback experience for the subject of trauma. Petit's poems are imagined phenomenological recounts that attempt to convey and/or elicit a sense of emotional memory. At their most effective, these poems achieve an intuitive engagement from the reader, rather than a cognitive connection. Her strongest poems are visceral. What Petit's poetry offers (and what I hope to achieve with mine) is an assertive portrayal of the experience of trauma, and an attempt to convey the aftereffects of the socially taboo topic of rape. The experience of the lasting effects of trauma is ill explored outside of war poetry. As

the literary canon is dominated by men, so are the narratives of trauma response. As it is less likely to see a portrayal of a woman's experience of trauma *after the incident*, it is also significantly more unlikely to read the (attempts at) recovery or healing for a female character who has suffered trauma. Therefore, there is a strong appeal in reading the personal onto the symbolic parallel.

Petit turns Kahlo's trauma into poetry which explores the imagined interpersonal, the projected struggle for intimacy in a sexual context for a victim of trauma. While Kahlo's trauma is explicitly identified as medical, it is possible to read the recount of the injury incurred as sexualised. Sexual trauma is particularly relevant in 'Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird'<sup>9</sup> where Petit casts the character of Kahlo as longing to form sexual intimacy. The poem directly references Kahlo's specific bodily trauma. The title of the poem refers to Kahlo's painting by the same name—in Petit's version, the wings of the dead hummingbird worn around Kahlo's neck 'fly'<sup>10</sup> her 'back to the day of the accident,'<sup>11</sup> thereby highlighting the liminal space in which the trauma experience exists.

#### The Scarred Mind: Time Travelling Through Trauma Flashback

Disruption to the brain's perception of time is an integral component of the experience of trauma, specifically the flashback which results from a trigger, as illustrated in 'Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird' and 'Remembrance of an Open Wound'.<sup>12</sup> 'Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird'<sup>13</sup> opens with the phrase, 'When I came to you last night...',<sup>14</sup> where the present tense reflection connects with the idea of remembrance

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<sup>9</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup>Petit, p. 8.

which is emphasised in the title of the following poem, 'Remembrance of an Open Wound'.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the fourteen poems, Petit plays with time and tense, returning again and again to motifs from the visual lexicon of the crash – particularly the much fixated upon 'gold powder / spilt from a fellow passenger.'<sup>16</sup> 'Self Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird',<sup>17</sup> paints the scene of the crash, embodies the lurch of the tram, Kahlo, and time at the moment of impact, entangled with the moment that Kahlo was impaled, left for dead. However, what is being recounted is not the experience of trauma itself, but a flashback during sex.

When the moment came for you to enter me  
  
I grinned at the sugar skulls and wax doves  
  
and tried not to think of the crash,  
  
the handrail piercing me like a first lover,  
  
and me bouncing forward, my clothes torn off,  
  
my body sparkling with the gold powder<sup>18</sup>

The narrative voice, that of Kahlo, describes in exact detail the sequence of events that she is trying not to think of, but in that very act the idea is brought to the front of her mind. In Petit's portrayal of Kahlo, she reflects on 'last night',<sup>19</sup> following the fact, recalls her active effort to ignore the memory embedded in her. In closing the poem with a circularity in ideas, a repetition of 'night'<sup>20</sup> occurs, and Kahlo's tenacity is reflected in the lines which precede

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<sup>15</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup>Petit, p. 8.

‘Remembrance of an Open Wound’;<sup>21</sup> those being, ‘Just as tomorrow night I’ll try again / to get this sex thing right, and the night after that.’<sup>22</sup> The resilience and perseverance of the trauma victim’s attempts to overcome fear and shame in the face of triggers which disrupt joy and passion is emphasised further in the assonance of right and night, adding an aural repetition to mimic the behavioural repetition of returning to ‘you’<sup>23</sup> (presumed to be a lover or a partner, perhaps Diego, perhaps another), and returning to face the flashbacks, and the suffering incurred on her body, once she was ‘skewered’.<sup>24</sup>

When the body keeps the score, because the body holds trauma, subsequent intrusions in the physical (regardless of sexual intent) can trigger a trauma response, where the temporal grasp of the person experiencing the psychological trigger is blurred.

‘Remembrance of an Open Wound’<sup>25</sup> can be read as analogous to the experience of a woman raped, and the subsequent difficulties in reengaging with her own body, sexuality and partner in the aftermath.

Whenever we make love, you say

it’s like making love to a crash

I bring the bus with me into the bedroom.<sup>26</sup>

In a flashback, it is *like* the moment of trauma is reoccurring, hence the use of simile in the second line. This opening sentence which is split and spread across three lines speaks to the lasting and devastating impact of bodily trauma on an individual.

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<sup>21</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup>Petit, p. 9.

As the narrative voice introduces the idea of the pervasive nature of trauma, Petit ‘bring[s]’<sup>27</sup> together bodily invasion, and PTSD flashbacks to illustrate how trauma attaches itself to the perception of one who has been wounded. In exploring the aftereffects of Kahlo’s medical, bodily injury, Petit demonstrates the ways in which bodily trauma (sexual or otherwise) becomes entangled with other bodily, physical, sensory experiences. In representing the difficulty of sex after trauma Petit returns to the image of Kahlo’s body, ambiguously cloaked in a passed moment – the present moment is a pensive one, where the narrator reflects.

The ‘you’<sup>28</sup> appears to continue from ‘Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird’<sup>29</sup> where the ‘you’<sup>30</sup> is presumed to be a lover.

You look at me in my gold underwear –  
  
a crone of sixteen, who lost  
  
her virginity to a lightning bolt.  
  
It’s time to pull the handrail out.  
  
I didn’t expect love to feel like this –  
  
you holding me down with your knee,  
  
wrenching the steel rod from my charred body  
  
quickly, kindly setting me free.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>28</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup>Petit, p. 9.



The reading of ‘you’<sup>32</sup> is ambiguated through the conflation of ‘love’<sup>33</sup> and the vivid imagery of Kahlo’s body in the wake of the accident, where the ‘you’<sup>34</sup> appears to be both the rescuer on the scene of the accident, and simultaneously the ‘you’<sup>35</sup> is her lover. Again Petit plays with time, tense and wedges uncertainty between the layers of explicit detail and technicolour imagery. It is at once confusing and consoling; agonising and beautiful.

Petit compares the injuries Kahlo sustained from the handrail piercing her body to losing her ‘virginity’,<sup>36</sup> a repulsive notion from the cultural perspective that applies innocence and possible vulnerability on the archetype of the naïve virgin. The idea of a forceful loss of virginity is worsened particularly due to its violence; the event leaves visible wounds, which are confronting on a visceral level. This is paralleled by the invisible, the implied splitting of self – the attack via a site of vulnerability – the vulva. Petit opens *The Wounded Deer*<sup>37</sup> with ‘My Birth’<sup>38</sup> where the vulva is introduced in its capacity to give life where the narrative voice of Kahlo refers to the image of her mother birthing her as ‘her sex is my necklace.’<sup>39</sup> Thus, the iconography of Frida Kahlo’s paintings are employed by Petit to explore questions of the female body, and ideas of intrusion upon the bounds of self.

The line ‘I didn’t expect love to feel like this’<sup>40</sup> indicates the mix of pain and relief in the release of the object of trauma from her body in the moment, and metaphorically by her lover in the continuous present. Even moments of what can be considered as diametrically opposed to suffering, such as connection, love and support are tainted by the pain of the traumatic incident. The poem positions the narrator as trapped by her trauma, hence the

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<sup>32</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup>Petit, p. 8, Petit, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup>Petit.

<sup>38</sup>Petit, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup>Petit, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup>Petit, p. 9.

moment of release (or assisted escape) implied in the line ‘setting me free.’<sup>41</sup> The present continuous tense indicates an absolute completion of action which conveys the subsequent unknown of when (or if) the hurt will be gone from her mind and body. Zoë Brigley Thompson, in analysing *The Wounded Deer*<sup>42</sup> through the dichotomy of the wound and the mask does acknowledge the casting of the lover as a rescuer, as a hero in aid of the damaged woman:

Here the lover becomes a kind of divine patron saint who with superhuman strength wrenches the handrail out, a struggle that is performed in a set of two long stresses, ‘steel rod’. The succession of adverbs reveals though that this is a liberating process and the final line reflects the entire poem’s movement towards release.<sup>43</sup>

However, to read this as an act that holds finality, that liberates Kahlo (as representative of those who have experienced trauma), is to ignore the psychologically pervasive nature of PTSD. The idea that in one moment the vestiges of trauma can be pulled from the body, extricated from the physical being in which it is lodged seems hopelessly optimistic. A more helpful way to consider this is that in this moment of removal, while the instrument of harm has been symbolically removed, what remains is the tunnel through anatomy. A more holistic understanding of the experience of trauma would draw attention to the inevitable tenderness of the skin, organs, veins from which the object has been pulled. You cannot cauterise what runs right through you. The wound is within the body (much like rape trauma is), and even in emergency response to the immediate causes of harm, the wound will remain.

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<sup>41</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>42</sup>Petit.

<sup>43</sup>Zoë Brigley Thompson, ‘The Wound and the Mask: Rape, Recovery and Poetry in Pascale Petit’s *The Wounded Deer: Fourteen Poems after Frida Kahlo*’, in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, ed. by Zoë Brigley Thompson and SORCHA GUNNE (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 200-216 (p. 206).

Kahlo (and Petit by extension) is characterised as having escaped the perceived weakness of vulnerability and shame in adopting a mask, which Brigley Thompson praises. Instead, I suggest that it is not a masking strategy that Petit uses, but rather a build-up of calloused skin. This creates a ‘thick-skinned’ persona in that the writer is not placed in the sensitive position of emotionality, of being thin skinned. By burying her own wound under the layers of biographical detail, and exploring trauma through the voice of Kahlo, Petit is able to prevent her work from falling prey to criticism of her poetry as confessional, thus shielding her, the writer, from the vulnerability of another probing her wounds directly. With trauma, time is not linear, and it is not as simple as a one act release.

The metaphor of a strike of lightning to allude to Kahlo’s traumatic injury parallels with the Greek myth of Semele, who is struck dead instantaneously by her mystery lover in the night upon setting her sight on the ‘Divine Fire’<sup>44</sup> of Zeus, the king of gods, when he visited her in his ‘purest’ form – lightning. Brigley Thompson touches on this idea, and connects gods (such as Zeus) to the concept of the wound, as seen in the violated woman’s body:

Petit describes Kahlo in ‘gold underwear’ as ‘a crone of sixteen, who lost / her virginity to a lightning bolt’ (Petit 2005: 9.12; 9.13–14). In Mayan and Aztec culture, one aspect of the moon was the ‘elderly moon’ which often figured as ‘a decrepit, sometimes toothless woman’ (Longhenna 2000: 122). The contrast between the sexuality of the gold underwear and the image of the elderly woman is subversive, as is the moment of intercourse which seems to have been precipitated by a god with a ‘lightning bolt’. The struggle at least briefly seems to reposition La Chingada (the archetypal violated woman or mother), and her relation to the Western patriarchal

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen L. Harris and Gloria Platzner, *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights* (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995), p. 127.

gods, to follow a different script of power. This is perhaps confirmed in the moment when climax does come, because what occurs is not a penetration, but a release.<sup>45</sup>

Brigley Thompson reads this poem with an implied finality to the trauma in the form of release, in the inverse to penetration – it's a reverse reckoning, an undeflowering—the removal of the invading object/body that caused the trauma. Despite the removal, the anticipation of release, it is evident in the intimate setting of the lovers' bedroom that the moment of trauma has long lingered. As far as temporal fragmentation goes, this reversal of the literal from the past in the present through the figurative recreates the embodiment of trauma and bodily injury, an assault on the biology essentialised as feminine, an attack on the self of the woman, the confines of her skin.

Brigley Thompson comments on the hopeful anticipation in the iambic rhythm of 'It's time to pull the handrail out,'<sup>46</sup> aptly commenting that it 'creates a feeling of readiness and expectancy about the possibility of release.'<sup>47</sup> However, it is also a moment of great anticipatory anxiety. It might be time, but time is untrustworthy, and so is touching the wound. The liberatory reading of this passage is summarised as being an act of a 'lover [who] performs a selfless act that releases the narrator from a state of being in chingada. The act of pulling out the handrail is not only a bodily release, but the removal of trauma.'<sup>48</sup>

In Brigley Thompson's reading, Petit discards the idea of the wounded woman, the vulnerable victim, in favour of a mask, the stoic façade with a direct gaze that dominates Kahlo's self-portraits amidst a flurry of vivid images. She asserts that, 'When the poem concludes, Petit's speaker is no longer in a state of chingada, although it has been necessary

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<sup>45</sup>Brigley Thompson, p. 206.

<sup>46</sup>Petit, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup>Brigley Thompson, p. 206.

<sup>48</sup>Brigley Thompson, p. 206.

to tear open her old wound, to probe her shame and display it defiantly.’<sup>49</sup> This suggests that defiance in the direct gaze – the emotionless mask – is only possible in the wake of extreme suffering. While Petit creates a callous between the personal detail and the narrative of *The Wounded Deer*,<sup>50</sup> she narrates the projected personal, pressing up against tender skin.

Brigley Thompson’s analysis focuses on Petit’s seeming rejection of the wound, and emphasis on the mask of Frida Kahlo’s biographical detail in the place of her own. Petit’s work does not make spectacle of suffering, or tantalise through trauma, rather it buries human pain under layers of borrowed iconography to poetically convey an experience of trauma. Brigley Thompson describes Petit’s approach to *The Wounded Deer*<sup>51</sup> as one which challenges the accepted expression of rape poetry as confessional and autobiographical:

Challenging narratives that pose rape victims’ testimony as a kind of redemption, Petit turns away from the exposure of the wound adopting the mask which deflects the curious scrutiny of the public.<sup>52</sup>

While the *chingada* is the wounded woman, Kahlo speared through with a handrail, the converse is identified as the femme fatale. The femme fatale’s onscreen representations are comparable to the face of Kahlo in her self-portraits, and to that of the figure of Kahlo which Petit adopts. In Brigley Thompson’s definition, ‘The antithesis of the wound is the mask, since rather than opening up, the mask creates mystery, ambiguity and questioning of ‘truth’.’<sup>53</sup> She continues to reference Julia Kristeva’s discussions of how the use of mask ambiguates truth and that which is false/fictional and concludes: ‘The mask challenges the label of victim, because it offers not ‘a visible surface of pain’ but a face that is intriguing,

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<sup>49</sup> Brigley Thompson, p. 207.

<sup>50</sup> Petit.

<sup>51</sup> Petit.

<sup>52</sup> Brigley Thompson, p. 201.

<sup>53</sup> Brigley Thompson, p. 202.

questioning and difficult to read.’<sup>54</sup> Here Brigley Thompsons aversion to confessionalism is made evident, as she applauds the lengths to which Petit has gone to to disguise her own trauma, while having had personal correspondence with the poet to inform her reading.

Brigley Thompson concludes that ‘the possibilities of not speaking, of presenting a cold and impassive face that refuses to give up the desired confession is particularly effective’.<sup>55</sup> While I acknowledge the strength of the universality afforded to a narrative removed from the confessional realm of the personal expression of trauma, it seems contradictory to label this as silence, or impassive as the poems themselves brim with the emotional.

Petit’s narrative voice may not be recounting the specific biographical details of her own traumas, but in co-opting Kahlo’s biography, there is no censorship in the explicit and brutal portrayal of *an* experience of trauma (including the specific incident). Brigley Thompson casts the mask in reverence: ‘Like the femme fatale, Kahlo offers clues to the trauma that leaves traces in the painting, though overall it is dominated by the emotionless face.’<sup>56</sup> She attributes this same aesthetic style to the methods by which Petit employs the mask—‘Neither artist denies the pain and suffering of being broken open, of being chingada, but both present the situation subversively, employing ‘a constant oscillation between masking and unmasking, self-concealment and self-exposure’.’<sup>57</sup> This oscillation creates a specific ‘gaze’, that of a ‘mythical Medusa’,<sup>58</sup> whereby both Petit and Kahlo are able to shield themselves behind a threatening glare, they ‘reproduce this gaze as a kind of self-

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<sup>54</sup>Brigley Thompson, pp. 202-203.

<sup>55</sup>Brigley Thompson, p. 213.

<sup>56</sup>Brigley Thompson, p. 210.

<sup>57</sup>Brigley Thompson, p. 213.

<sup>58</sup>Brigley Thompson, p. 203.

defence in their art... Petit reproduces it specifically in the context of sexual violence and the curious voyeurs who approach her work with an objectifying gaze.<sup>59</sup>

In 'The Blue House', Petit explores Kahlo's process in first person perspective:

I paint my living natures

split open. My brush is a scalpel.<sup>60</sup>

The metaphor which reconfigures Kahlo's painting tools into surgical instruments emphasises the precision with which her art cuts to the core of her pain and suffering, the art that rips her chest open, places broken columns in the cavity beneath a stoic face, gazing directly at the 'brave viewer.'<sup>61</sup> Petit's personal poetic stance regarding the unbearableness of life being manageable through artistic expression is echoed in her representation of Kahlo throughout the stanzas which follow, mixing medical reference, cultural symbolism (the recurrence of candy skulls), and painting imagery which culminate in a climactic flashback.

The nature of PTSD and its disruption of linearity for sufferers' conceptions of time and self are identified with the question of time:

And time?

What colour is time?

Time is a bus where I lie at an angle,

pierced by a pole in a crash.

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<sup>59</sup>Brigley Thompson, p. 203.

<sup>60</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>61</sup>Petit, p. 22.

Time is my orange womb, skewered

on a cobalt trolley.<sup>62</sup>

Time is an intangible, abstract concept, which folds in on itself, doubling over and circling back in flashes. Visual information is the prime sensory data which the traumatised brain latches onto. When the language and sequential sections of the brain shutdown, the emotional and visual receptors flare up. That trauma is presented in full colour through this poem is telling of Petit's empathetic understanding of Kahlo's potential experience of trauma, and reflects the ways in which 'Time stretched out its spectrum / and screeched its brakes.'<sup>63</sup> The spectrum referred to is ambiguous, and could refer to either colour, time, or both. In context it can refer to time in that her past is stretching forward, her present stretching back to the crash, back to the crash, back to the crash.

Time morphs, her past trauma *is* the bus which collided with her tram, smashing into it. The question of time's colour goes unanswered, usurped by the vivid description of her body parts. Time is attributed to the womb due to its connection with reproduction; lineage and linearity are here conflated. 'Time is my orange womb,'<sup>64</sup> time/her womb is unnatural, and in becoming 'skewered'<sup>65</sup> is pinned to that moment, to her trauma – it has invaded her body, her conception of time is impaled with the moment of harm. The fact that it 'screeched its brakes,'<sup>66</sup> the 'scre' sound echoing the inevitable screams of metal on metal, rubber on

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<sup>62</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>63</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>64</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>65</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>66</sup>Petit, p. 13.



tarmac, glass in shatters, indicates a stopping, halting, freezing of this moment in time. The ‘scre’ echoes as the silent, internal scream of embodied trauma.

Following the image of the speared womb is the poignant line ‘And this is how I started painting.’<sup>67</sup> This dependent clause, with the coordinating conjunction ‘and’,<sup>68</sup> directly links the representation of Kahlo’s traumatic experience, to the cathartic act of art making. In Kahlo’s case this is painting, and in Petit’s it is poetry.

No matter what, even with a release, trauma persists.

### The Question of Confessionalism

In a 2007 interview, prior to the publication of her ‘sequence of poems about Frida Kahlo’,<sup>69</sup> Petit discussed her writing process, answering questions pertaining to the parallels between her biography, and the content of her poetry. Here, Petit explicitly stated that she ‘write[s] about oppression from both [her] parents.’<sup>70</sup> In reference to visiting her estranged father on his deathbed, she outlined the ways in which he failed her as a parent in *The Zoo Father*,<sup>71</sup> explaining that she ‘was appalled and fascinated by the breathing struggle, and also saw it as the Amazon struggling to breathe.’<sup>72</sup> Petit’s channelling of her personal experience via figurative language into her poetry is likewise evident in her relationship with her mother. The interview continued in this vein as Petit responded to Lidia Vianu’s statement that she writes a ‘mute poetry’ where ‘when everything is said and done, there is still a poignant core of silence needing to be spelled out’:<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>68</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>69</sup>Vianu, para 10.

<sup>70</sup>Vianu, para 2.

<sup>71</sup>Pascale Petit, *The Zoo Father* (Bridgend: Seren, 2001).

<sup>72</sup>Vianu, para 10.

<sup>73</sup>Vianu, para 9.

I tend to live through art, which isn't very sensible. My next book has a number of explorations, but one thing I want to do in it is write about my mother in a way that satisfies me. The closest I've got so far is in a sequence of her as a rattlesnake – the plumed serpent – she was scary and is much harder to write about than my father.

Psychological abuse is harder to write about than sexual abuse, but in many ways it's worse.<sup>74</sup>

In response to the interviewer's comment that she 'convey[s] but never confess[es]',<sup>75</sup> that the reader 'somehow know[s] the experience you are writing about, although the facts of the story remain hidden',<sup>76</sup> Petit explained that this began as a form of refuge as a teenager – 'I started doing this when I lived with my mother, to escape from her. I think poems do this better than fiction.'<sup>77</sup> Writing provided Petit an escape from self, from her own biography. This positioning of writing as a 'refuge',<sup>78</sup>—that is a safe space, a sanctuary within which to escape and/or confront trauma—follows logically from Petit's avoidance of the purely confessional first-person mode discussed in her approach to *The Wounded Deer*.<sup>79</sup>

*The Wounded Deer*<sup>80</sup> is a thin red booklet, with poetry bright and bold—'The Blue House',<sup>81</sup> for one, which refers to Frida Kahlo's home in Mexico where she lived while recovering after the accident. Here she began to paint. The scene is a statement: 'I paint my living natures',<sup>82</sup> and is interspersed with the memory and feeling of the traumatic tram accident. This is amalgamated and fragmented, synchronous present/past. The 'orange

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<sup>74</sup>Vianu, para 10.

<sup>75</sup>Vianu, para 7.

<sup>76</sup>Vianu, para 7.

<sup>77</sup>Vianu, para 8.

<sup>78</sup>Vianu, para 8.

<sup>79</sup>Petit.

<sup>80</sup>Petit.

<sup>81</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>82</sup>Petit, p. 13.

womb',<sup>83</sup> is preceded by lines that describe 'this house.'<sup>84</sup> This jump in tense immediately following visual description illustrates the seemingly random nature of triggers for those who live with PTSD. For the traumatised brain, any sensory data that was particularly emotionally relevant at the time of a trauma incident can evoke a fear response (a movement, a sound, a colour, a shape), and trigger the fragmentary not-here-not-there feeling of a flashback.

For the non-traumatised brain, it is still human to make associations, and communicate through shared connotative understandings. Colour is a strong visual sign which evokes mood, and is strongly present in Kahlo's paintings and diary<sup>85</sup> and Petit's poetry. In 'Self Portrait and Hummingbird',<sup>86</sup> Petit opens the poem with an image of Frida Kahlo, on the wings of the hummingbird, being flown 'back to the day of the accident.'<sup>87</sup> This poem most explicitly illustrates the accident scene; 'the handrail piercing me... and me bounced forward, my clothes torn off.'<sup>88</sup> In this poem, Petit places the trauma faced by Kahlo within a context where she is abandoned following her trauma—placed as beyond repair. The others are 'the wounded';<sup>89</sup> they leave her, thinking her dead. This beyond-wound categorisation places Kahlo's near dead body within a setting of injury. The wounded surround her and the wound symbol engulfs her. The wound symbol is one which transcends social connotations, it is visual information that elicits a strong reaction. Even when portrayed subversively for shock, gore or with the intention to offend, it is only so effective due to the powerful nature of its associations of danger, fear, pain and mortality.

Petit herself takes no overt issue with confessionalism, though she does warm more to other descriptors of her work. Given her tendency to utilise external symbols, icons and

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<sup>83</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>84</sup>Petit, p. 13.

<sup>85</sup>Fuentes.

<sup>86</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>87</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>88</sup>Petit, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup>Petit, p. 8.

imagery, this seems to be more in line with inaccuracy, rather than distaste. In ‘Private and Public Wars’,<sup>90</sup> Petit discusses the value in the maligned practice of confessional poetry. She questions the disparity in critical response between poetry which focuses on public trauma, such as the war poetry of Wilfred Owen and his contemporaries, and private traumas. In the opening of her article in the *New Welsh Review*, she states: ‘war is a worthy subject for poetry, but poems about domestic war do not always get the same approval.’<sup>91</sup>

Petit draws attention—perhaps begrudgingly—to the fact that she is ‘often labelled a confessional poet who...writes critically about her parents.’<sup>92</sup> She references *The Zoo Father*,<sup>93</sup> and the collection that followed, *The Huntress*,<sup>94</sup> where she ‘appear[s]’<sup>95</sup> to have written poems ‘about abusive parents’<sup>96</sup> where she has ‘attempt[ed] to transform the harrowing material by interfusing it with Amazonian and Aztec imagery [respectively].’<sup>97</sup> While this is apt, she claims a ‘deeper exploration.’<sup>98</sup> The exploration is based on a belief in ‘the essential goodness of people.’<sup>99</sup> Petit places this alongside the personal process of poetry conveying trauma as a need to imaginatively recast close family relationships which challenge that belief.<sup>100</sup> It is not purely cathartic, but a counter-narrative to lived experience. Perhaps, in recasting herself as Kahlo, she is able to recognise the ways in which trauma has forced her to persist through pain and her choice to turn suffering into art. The mask of Kahlo’s self-portraits in particular shield Petit from the reader; shields the reader from the biographical “fact” of Petit’s writing in the same way calloused skin shields raw skin from

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<sup>90</sup>Pascale Petit, ‘Private and Public Wars’, *The New Welsh Review*, 72 (2006), 8-14.

<sup>91</sup>Petit, (p. 8).

<sup>92</sup>Petit, (p. 13).

<sup>93</sup>Petit.

<sup>94</sup>Pascale Petit, *The Huntress* (Bridgend: Seren, 2005).

<sup>95</sup>Petit, (p. 13).

<sup>96</sup>Petit, (p. 13).

<sup>97</sup>Petit, (p. 13).

<sup>98</sup>Petit, (p. 13).

<sup>99</sup>Petit, (p. 13).

<sup>100</sup>Petit, (p. 13).

friction. This is particularly effective given Kahlo's signature self-portrait: an impassive face amidst tumultuous colours and scenes.

Evident in the title *The Wounded Deer*<sup>101</sup> is the victimisation, pain and harm of the wound which is understood as symbolic of Petit's 'sexual abuse'<sup>102</sup>. While the traumas of Frida Kahlo's life are harnessed to evoke emotion in the reader, the ambiguity around biography, whereby rape itself is not foregrounded, demonstrates the variation of ways in which poets can explore trauma. In this case, the assertion of rape trauma, as an integral aspect of *The Wounded Deer*<sup>103</sup> has been drawn, initially, from Brigley Thompson, and has been found, subsequently, in my own reading. Rape trauma is not the sole interpretation possible; rather, the visceral nature of the imagery provides symbolic possibilities representing a myriad of experiences of pain and suffering.

Much like Petit saw the poetic parallels between her father and the Amazon, and Eugenijus Alisanka's reading as comparable to his lived experience in Lithuania, it is inevitable that readers will apply their own personal experiences to an understanding of the experience expressed by a poet. At a Vilnius' Writers' Union Conference, Alisanka 'intrigued'<sup>104</sup> Petit in reference to a poem in *The Zoo Father*.<sup>105</sup> Alisanka here argued that the 'specific experience of that poem (where [Petit] shrink[s her] father's body with the help of a Jivaro shaman to reduce his power) did not limit it to the personal.'<sup>106</sup> The text-to-self connections made possible through Petit's projection of the personal onto an artist indicates the symbolic resonance of the imagery in conveying pain, suffering and the experience weaponised as a traumatic flashback. Regardless of a reader's personal suffering, through the

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<sup>101</sup> Petit.

<sup>102</sup> Vianu, para 10.

<sup>103</sup> Petit.

<sup>104</sup> Petit, (p. 13).

<sup>105</sup> Petit.

<sup>106</sup> Petit, (p. 13).

portrayal of Kahlo's pain and trauma, there is an evocation of the experience of trauma. Here the same intentional disregard for the personal in the reader's context is applied as the same disregard is applied to Petit's biography. Access to the details of her experience/s are negated on a conceptual level—what is retained is emotive poignancy. While there is no coherent narrative evident of the poet's life (this is not a memoir), there is a speaking of trauma flashbacks. For the most part, Petit reworks and reorganises the iconography of Kahlo's life and works, as drawn from Kahlo's own art, and subsequent recounts of her life in a variety of imaginative recounts.

There is something essentially visceral about the “facts” of Frida Kahlo's tram accident, which creates an undeniably wounded body. Due to her age and pervasive cultural myths regarding women's and girls' sexuality there is heightened concern for the vulnerability of human life, and a reminder of our shared mortality. On top of a deep human sympathy for a young (read: vulnerable, innocent, dependant) body coming to harm, there is a heightened lamentation in the cultural imagination due to perceived worth and purity made relevant due to the violent phallic image of a handrail piercing a groin. Given this is a female body, this penetrative image is obscene, and insult is added to injury with the perforation of the uterus. There is disruption to the linearity of a woman's role as conflated with reproductive capacity. In the puncturing of the womb symbol, the feminine ideal is brutally penetrated to the point of ruin. Shame is not applied, despite the psychosexual connotations as “virginity” persists, sexual purity is retained. While wounded, the body is not tainted—it does not fester in ways which victim blaming can infect the experience of traumatic injury, as Frida Kahlo retained her perceived “purity” in ways which are not necessarily conceived of in the rape of sexually active (or “promiscuous”) girls and women.

Brigley Thompson asserts that through the mask of Kahlo, Petit is ‘able to avoid the confessional voice.’<sup>107</sup> This assertion mirrors Vianu’s description of Petit’s writing as a style which will ‘convey but never confess.’<sup>108</sup> Brigley Thompson concludes:

To know the details of Petit’s life would be to undermine the political strategy that the mask represents, but what this poetry does offer is ‘a passionate point of view’ that gestures towards the scripts of power between man and woman, colonizer and colonized, native and stranger.<sup>109</sup>

In avoiding the specific, instead projecting the personal onto the mask (in this case Kahlo’s biography and iconography), Petit is able to speak to the universal. She explores the private wars and trauma that are pervasive themes within contemporary societies. In this way, *The Wounded Deer*<sup>110</sup> can be understood as an allusion to both Petit’s experience of trauma (psychological and sexual), and generalised human experience of trauma.

In writing on the connections between the individual and the universal, Petit quotes M. L. Rosenthal:

Confessionalism should be considered not as a prescriptive formula held by any one group but as a general permission felt by most poets to treat personal experience, even in its most intimate and painful aspects.<sup>111</sup>

Petit’s work glories in the intimate and painful details of Frida Kahlo’s biography, co-opting her pain. On the topic of her ‘father’s abuse and my mother’s malevolence’,<sup>112</sup> Petit draws attention to the connections between in the suffering of the individual, and the ability of

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<sup>107</sup> Brigley Thompson, p. 213.

<sup>108</sup> Brigley Thompson, p. 213.

<sup>109</sup> Brigley Thompson, p. 214.

<sup>110</sup> Petit.

<sup>111</sup> Petit, (p. 14).

<sup>112</sup> Petit, (p. 14).

communication of this to transcend the personal. She willingly positions her writing as ‘a close-up focus of what can happen in the public arena. As long as there is brutality in society this personal is universal.’<sup>113</sup>

While Petit is concerned with the abstract and holds an aversion to reception to her work which emphasises the confessional, (cast as the immediately recognisable suffering of a first-person account, told—presumably—from the narrative voice of the poet’s perspective), Fiona Benson stands in shame, and looks emotion in the eyes. Much like *The Wounded Deer*,<sup>114</sup> *Vertigo & Ghost*<sup>115</sup> tells the story of the ‘cycle of a woman’s life.’<sup>116</sup> In much the same way as Pascale Petit’s biographical details are not central to a reader’s capacity to vicariously experience trauma through Frida Kahlo’s biography, knowing Fiona Benson’s personal experiences with rape trauma is not imperative to an understanding. While Petit does not foreground rape, instead layering a thick skin on top of her own wounds through Kahlo’s story, Benson does foreground rape. What is less clear is an explicit statement of personal experience, despite the ‘I’<sup>117</sup> of the second part of the collection (which focuses on motherhood and fertility). In relation to her work, in a 2014 interview with Rachael Allen of *Granta*,<sup>118</sup> Benson states ‘I’ve always wanted to write from the gut, to write instinctively rather than cerebrally.’<sup>119</sup> Fiona Benson also shares that ‘when I’m writing poems I see it as a very private place where I can say whatever I want’<sup>120</sup> On writing about rape, Zeus, and how

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<sup>113</sup> Petit, (p. 14).

<sup>114</sup> Petit.

<sup>115</sup> Benson.

<sup>116</sup> Charlotte Higgins, ‘Forward prize winner Fiona Benson: ‘It’s still taboo to talk about rape and women’s bodies’’, *The Guardian*, 25 October 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/25/fiona-benson-forward-poetry-prize>> [accessed 22 March 2021].

<sup>117</sup> Benson, pp. 45-90

<sup>118</sup> Rachael Allen, ‘Interview: Fiona Benson & Rachael Allen’, *Granta* <<https://granta.com/interview-fiona-benson/>> [accessed 22 March 2021].

<sup>119</sup> Allen, para. 16.

<sup>120</sup> London Review of Books, Fiona Benson and Daisy Johnson: *Vertigo & Ghost*, *London Review of Books*, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/podcasts-and-videos/podcasts/at-the-bookshop/fiona-benson-and-daisy-johnson-vertigo-ghost>> [accessed 13 March 2021].



‘Zeus incarnates in the world around us as an abuser and a rapist, the many faces of Zeus’,<sup>121</sup> she draws attention to the ongoing fear and hurt that results from sexual assault and trauma. ‘It did make me feel vulnerable writing it...it didn’t feel safe.’<sup>122</sup> In terms of autobiography, following an interviewer’s musings on the presumed autobiographical content of women’s writing, Benson admits ‘most of it is quite autobiographical. I’m not gonna lie about that. It is often coming out of my life or experiences.... For me as a writer, that is something I do.’<sup>123</sup>

### Fiona Benson’s Zeus: The Blistering Wound in *Vertigo & Ghost*

*You only have to look at Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful  
and she’s laughing.*<sup>124</sup>

– ‘*The Laugh of the Medusa*’, H       Cixous

*Vertigo & Ghost*,<sup>125</sup> by Fiona Benson, uses mythology in order to explore femininity in contemporary culture through analogy between goddesses, nymphs and gorgons, and women’s narratives today. There is an emphasis on the body, which acts as a counter to the ethereal abstract language of a voice that feels like myth. There is blood, there are wounds, and there is rape. The word appears eight times<sup>126</sup>. Consequently, the repetition and perpetuation of rape as an aspect of society and civilisation is reflected in the frequent presence of the word on the page.

The collection is organised into two parts, with a single page poem, ‘Ace of Bass’,<sup>127</sup> opening Part One—it acts as prologue to the Zeus focus of the first part of the collection. The

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<sup>121</sup> London Review of Books.

<sup>122</sup> London Review of Books.

<sup>123</sup> London Review of Books.

<sup>124</sup> Cixous, p. 885.

<sup>125</sup> Benson.

<sup>126</sup> Part One holds five instances of ‘rape’, one instance of ‘rapist’ and one instance of ‘raped’. Part Two contains one count of ‘raped’.

<sup>127</sup> Benson, p. 1.

imagery is vivid, and it brims with boundless hope and utter youthful enthusiasm. Right up until the last line, that is. The poem closes with a sombre aphorism, foreshadowing the tragedy to unfold. Following Part One, which focuses on the collective suffering at the hands of Zeus, and Zeus-like figures and characters throughout history, Part Two<sup>128</sup> concentrates on pregnancy, birth and the current of fear for the safety of girls and women in all contemporary societies, particularly that which her 'daughters',<sup>129</sup> inhabit. In examining Benson's use of the wound idea/image the blister is most tender in Part One. While there is much to discuss in terms of the bodily autonomy of women in Part Two, in Part One, the mythic is most concentrated and reflective of the pervasive nature of the rape culture in which Benson, Petit, Lockwood and Place write. Thus, Part One is the exclusive focus of the following analysis and discussion.

#### Before the Burn: Collective Adolescent Sexuality and the Harm in Healing

In the first poem of Part One, 'Ace of Bass',<sup>130</sup> women's sexuality and bodily autonomy are explored. The opening lines 'That was the summer/ hormones poured into me/ like an incredible chemical cocktail...',<sup>131</sup> present the idea of sexuality descending upon these young women's bodies, 'into a tall iced glass',<sup>132</sup> as spilling into the vessel that is their physical self. While Benson explores this 'gorgeous euphoric mist',<sup>133</sup> with reverence and nostalgic anticipation, the past tense narrative voice creates a sense of foreboding. This sense of foreboding, of uncertainty, tension and unknown danger is present in the idea of innocence in exploration as the adolescents discover their own sexuality, their own libido:

and we talked about who'd done what with whom

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<sup>128</sup> Benson, pp. 45-90

<sup>129</sup> Benson, p. 89.

<sup>130</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>131</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>132</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>133</sup> Benson, p. 1.

and how it felt, all of us quickening,  
 and sex wasn't here yet, but it was  
 coming, and we were running towards it  
 its gorgeous euphoric mist;  
 pushing into our starved bodies at night  
 for relief, like after-calm might last,  
 like there was a deep well of love on the other side.<sup>134</sup>

The last line holds a bitterness in its retrospection, where a resentful 'like'<sup>135</sup> forewarns the reader that in the sexualisation of young women's bodies, there is not love. The poem commemorates the intrigue of sex, and mourns a time in her own life when she was the master of her own body, the leader for her own sexual pleasure. It is simultaneously the voice of the female narrator, and the 'we',<sup>136</sup> who are afflicted by this wounding of feminine adolescent sexuality. It offers up the bittersweet, pyrrhic victory of the discovery of sexuality which doubles as a curse, which invites sexualisation, objectification and harm to the body-sexual.

John Self of *The Guardian* labels 'Ace of Bass',<sup>137</sup> a 'premonitory poem about puberty'.<sup>138</sup> The idea of sex or sexuality (a 'mist')<sup>139</sup> descending from above, 'pushing into',<sup>140</sup> bodies is particularly poignant as a segue into the introduction of Zeus—himself a descending force who pushes himself into women's bodies—in the form of a bull, a swan, a golden mist. While the portrayal of the 'mist'<sup>141</sup> in 'Ace of Bass',<sup>142</sup> is positive — euphoric — there is a

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<sup>134</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>135</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>136</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>137</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>138</sup> John Self, Vertigo & Ghost by Fiona Benson review – from nature to humanity, *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/04/vertigo-and-ghost-fiona-benson-review>> [accessed 27 March 2021]. para. 1.

<sup>139</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>140</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>141</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>142</sup> Benson, p. 1.

sinister foreshadowing of the golden shower, the mist of Zeus drifting down to impregnate a sleeping Danaë. The capacity of mist to linger, even once the sun has risen, and its chillingly invasive touch to any unsheltered body is illustrative of the way both a ‘gorgeous euphoric mist’,<sup>143</sup> and the artistic renditions of a golden shower misting the bedroom permeate the emotional climate from a subjective standpoint where either curiosity or fear pervade the consciousness of the individual.

Following ‘Ace of Bass’,<sup>144</sup> Part One contains the eponymous ‘Zeus’,<sup>145</sup> of the section’s heading. It brims with the misogynistic, sadistic gaze of the ultimate patriarch and his archetypical omnipresence. Benson’s narrator takes on Zeus, opening with him imprisoned, interrogated. The narrative voice of the poem ‘[Zeus] days I talked with Zeus’,<sup>146</sup> is that of the ‘I’,<sup>147</sup> from ‘Ace of Bass’.<sup>148</sup> She recalls the days she ‘talked with Zeus’,<sup>149</sup> where the reader is positioned to empathise with the victim of his crimes:

I felt the blood trouble and  
burn under my skin

found blisters  
on the soft parts  
of my body<sup>150</sup>

Benson here utilises the physical wound, anatomical pain. She places the injury not just upon the skin (in the form of the blister), but within the body of the victim. The hurt and pain and suffering are within the self of the narrator, trauma runs through her veins in her troubled

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<sup>143</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>144</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>145</sup> Benson, p. 3.

<sup>146</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>147</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>148</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>149</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>150</sup> Benson, p. 5.

‘blood’,<sup>151</sup> that ‘burns’.<sup>152</sup> The use of the adjective ‘soft’,<sup>153</sup> connotes weakness and vulnerability. The softest skin is most susceptible to both blisters and callouses, as emphasised by Benson. In her willingness to cast the poetic voice as ‘soft’,<sup>154</sup> Benson places *Vertigo & Ghost*<sup>155</sup> as a narrative which seeks not to shield the reader from pain, but to pull the focus towards the injurious capacity of a world which maintains the dominance of strength, the fortitude of the callous. While Petit thickly layers a barrier between an “I” that may be read as herself and the “I” of the poetry collection, Benson seemingly ignores this protective strategy, cutting straight to the core of the hurt.

‘[Zeus] days I talked with Zeus’,<sup>156</sup> continues with the king of gods  
 contained: bullet-proof glass  
 and a speaker-phone between us<sup>157</sup>

Benson, however, complicates this imprisonment in a manner which reflects the flawed justice systems of western civilisation. The collection is not a revenge fantasy whereby women are able to exert vengeance on the perpetrators of violence against them, rather the inequity and unfairness of the impact of rape on women is emphasised in the line which follows the above, concluding the stanza:

and still I wasn’t safe

thunder moved in my brain

tissue-crease

haemorrhage<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>152</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>153</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>154</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>155</sup> Benson.

<sup>156</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>157</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>158</sup> Benson, p. 5.

Kate Kellaway of *The Guardian* reads this as a transition piece from ‘Ace of Bass’, characterised, in contrast to John Self’s review, as premonitory to be ‘on the dawning of female sexuality, gives no clue of what is to follow.’<sup>159</sup> She comments on ‘[Zeus] days I talked with Zeus,’<sup>160</sup> characterising it as a transition ‘[f]rom ordinary virginal appetite, there is a fall, as through a trap door, into a poem resembling a crime scene.’<sup>161</sup>

The stanza break allows the fear to linger through the negative space on the page, before being promptly picked up again in the following stanza which illustrates the lasting effects of trauma on the mind, brain and body of the recipient of rape. The disruptive nature of a triggered amygdala is represented in the line ‘thunder moved in my brain,’<sup>162</sup> whereby the trauma endurer (rather than survivor) has absorbed and internalised the throbbing force of the wall shaking sound of thunder. The vibrations of the natural phenomenon which coincides with lightning (a symbol of Zeus himself) reflects the ways in which the threat of violence, and fear of men may be internalised. The image of the brain corrupted is intensified in the ‘tissue-crease,’<sup>163</sup> in the folds of grey matter which act as chief executive officer of a person’s thought processes and subsequent perception of reality. The imagery is blasted apart, exploded by haemorrhage. Given the cultural conflation between women’s selves and their sex, this ‘tissue-crease,’<sup>164</sup> image is also applicable to the labia majora and labia minora. The rupturing connotation of ‘haemorrhage,’<sup>165</sup> is simultaneously representative of the injurious invasion of a rape at the site of trauma; the vagina.

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<sup>159</sup> Kate Kellaway, ‘Vertigo & Ghost by Fiona Benson review – songs of shock and survival’, *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/21/fiona-benson-vertigo-ghost-kate-kellaway-review>> [accessed 27 March 2021], para. 1.

<sup>160</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>161</sup> Kellaway, para. 3.

<sup>162</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>163</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>164</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>165</sup> Benson, p. 5.

In the moment that the woman of the poem registers a fear for safety—‘and still I wasn’t safe’,<sup>166</sup>—a threat to survival, the very vessels of her internal organs rupture, aptly rendering the emotionally explosive experience of a trauma trigger. In this moment there is a complete disintegration of wholeness of self, symbolised by the injury to the brain—oft conceptualised as the seat of self, the storehouse for the mind. Following this disruption to bodily integrity at a metaphorical level, the first person narrative voice swells with righteous anger at the violence the mythological patriarch has perpetuated against women’s bodies and the centuries of harm done by powerful men echoes through the final line where the italicised dialogue reads ‘you won’t get away with this’.<sup>167</sup> The collection very much speaks to feminist backlash to rape culture and patriarchy, giving voice to those who dissent from knowing their proverbial place, and amplifying or echoing the voices of the many women who come forward in the media or through the court systems. Regardless of outcome, that ‘vulcanised and screaming’,<sup>168</sup> voice refuses to remain silent, and acts as a thrust into the evisceration of both the slanderable Zeus, and the character of the patriarchy manifested in the subsequent poems. Defamation and slander are unequivocally the intention and impact of the collection.

#### Classical Foundation & Critical Responses to *Vertigo & Ghost*

*The Guardian*’s Emily Hay summarises Benson’s collection as one which ‘brings the violence of Greek myths into the #MeToo era... explor[ing] female fear, desire and ferocity, while rebranding the god Zeus as a serial rapist.’<sup>169</sup> The notion of ‘rebranding’,<sup>170</sup> indicates the extant understandings of Zeus as a figurehead of Greek mythology, which fail to clearly identify the immoral behaviour of the king of gods, rather reading the legendary figure in line

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<sup>166</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>167</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>168</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>169</sup> Emily Hay, *The Guardian*, *Fiona Benson wins Forward prize with Greek myth poems for #MeToo age* <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/20/fiona-benson-wins-forward-prize-greek-myth-poems-metoo>> [accessed 22 March 2021], para. 2.

<sup>170</sup> Hay, para. 2.

with classical understandings of Zeus and his ‘jealous wife Hera’.<sup>171</sup> Contemporary scholarly responses to ancient Greek mythology place the narrative and characters within the cultural context of the time at which they first began to be recorded by the likes of Hesiod, Ovid, Aeschylus and their contemporaries. Additionally, the mythological figures have retained cultural significance within western culture through translation and study.

Often understandings of the myths are considered to deal with the duality of human nature. Stephen L. Harris and Gloria Platzner outline a conceptual foundation of common understanding/s of the figures, settings and events of mythology. In *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*<sup>172</sup> they state that in ‘an ambiguous and contradictory universe... a mixture of good and evil is the best one can hope for.’<sup>173</sup> This extends to readings of the gods. As a father figurehead, the ultimate patriarch, or, as the hosts of the Spirits podcast put it, ‘Fuckfather of all Fuckboys’,<sup>174</sup> Zeus is invested in the perpetuation of the family social structure. Within this structure, atop Olympus, he remains in power despite transgressions. The transgressions of Zeus are interpreted by Harris & Platzner as reflective of the inevitable chaos of the cosmos. But that is letting him off too easily. Zeus’s role as a figurehead that ‘sanctifies values that preserve the sacred institution of marriage’<sup>175</sup> is undermined, from a modern-day perspective by his assault on, and coercion of women. The accounts of mythological sexual violence demonstrate Zeus’s ambiguity, contradiction and ‘evil’<sup>176</sup> within his role as king of the gods. Excusing the archetypal patriarchy as reflective of the inherent nature of a ‘cosmos at war with itself’<sup>177</sup> is letting him (and the writers and translators of his mythology) off too easily in that it allows the narratives of power by force,

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<sup>171</sup> J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Press, 1990), p. 14.

<sup>172</sup> Stephen L. Harris & Gloria Platzner.

<sup>173</sup> Stephen L. Harris & Gloria Platzner, p. 235.

<sup>174</sup> Spirits Podcast, Episode 51: Zeus, *Spirits Podcast* <<https://spiritspodcast.com/episodes/zeus?rq=zeus>> [accessed 22 March 2021], para. 1.

<sup>175</sup> Stephen L. Harris & Gloria Platzner, p. 235.

<sup>176</sup> Stephen L. Harris & Gloria Platzner, p. 235.

<sup>177</sup> Stephen L. Harris & Gloria Platzner, p. 235.



and men's dominance over women to persist. The mythology of Zeus is fundamental to the development of notions which place women's bodies under the control of patriarchy and misogyny and this narrative legacy (amongst the etiological tales of many other gods, such as Apollo) is integral to the characteristics of contemporary rape cultures.

## Zeus

Throughout Benson's collection, Zeus speaks in audacious capitals, italicised. When reading from *Vertigo & Ghost*<sup>178</sup> at the T. S. Eliot Prize Shortlist Reading, Benson prefaces her presentation with a gesture cue for her audience since the capitalisation is not explicit in her spoken delivery: 'sometimes Zeus speaks. If he's speaking I'm going to hold my arms out to indicate that he's taking up space.'<sup>179</sup> Alongside this, his narcissism is indicated in the sentence structures which place him as subject, his claims open with an assertion of 'I',<sup>180</sup> at times followed by a blame-heavy 'you',<sup>181</sup> in subsequent stanzas. The first time Zeus speaks in the collection is to denigrate the attempts made to constrain him, to label those who condemn him as killjoys.

Zeus on parole:

NO FUN

THIS ANKLEBAND

TAZERS ME

EVERY TIME

I BRUSH THE BOUNDS

AND YET IT IS

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<sup>178</sup> Benson.

<sup>179</sup> T. S. Eliot Prize, Fiona Benson reads from 'Vertigo & Ghost', *YouTube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJ0ipOABnLM>> [accessed 27 March 2021].

<sup>180</sup> Benson, p. 9., Benson, p. 14., Benson, p. 19, Benson, p. 20., Benson, p. 23., Benson, p. 34., Benson, p. 36.

<sup>181</sup> Benson, p. 9.

SHALL WE SAY

EROTIC?

ITS SUDDEN CURSE

ITS THRILL<sup>182</sup>

Despite the ankle band, applied to those on parole (rather than those incarcerated) Zeus takes pleasure in his indiscretions, in testing the boundaries. While he is constrained, there is a distasteful subversion of the infliction of retributive justice. There is a masochistic/sadistic binary where Zeus occupies both the dominant and the submissive, taking pleasure in the masochistic that follows the sadistic. Zeus is titillated by the ‘thrill’<sup>183</sup> of a jolt of pain, and the preceding infliction of violence to women’s bodies. Immediately following Zeus’s speech, the narrator’s circumstance reflects wider cultural norms whereby rapists and sexual predators are enabled to perpetuate violence against women without being held to account in terms of the full extent of the law.

From Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Danaë’s story is a precursor to Rapunzel (given the imprisonment in a tower) and Sleeping Beauty’s Princess Aurora (who is preyed upon while sleeping). Locked in a tower and “visited” while she sleeps, Princess Danaë of Argos becomes impregnated by ‘Zeus, who is attracted to her beauty, [and] comes to her in a shower of gold, releasing [his] procreating power’<sup>184</sup> The mythology of Danaë has been reified in paintings by artists such as Gustav Klimt (1907). In Klimt’s *Danaë*,<sup>185</sup> the titular woman slumbers gracefully as a gold dust descends towards her. Gottfried Friedl asserts that in Klimt’s depiction of Danaë, ‘the connection with the original myth has been severed

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<sup>182</sup> Benson, p. 6.

<sup>183</sup> Benson, p. 6.

<sup>184</sup> Harris & Platzner, p. 209.

<sup>185</sup> Gottfried Friedl, *Klimt* (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2006), p. 209.

almost completely.’<sup>186</sup> On the surface, the image is aesthetically beautiful, although it holds sinister undertones of the entitlement and superiority of the powerful.

Fliedl asserts that in this ‘timeless moment of conception’,<sup>187</sup> Klimt has combined ‘the Art Nouveau motif of “omnifruitfulness” and his obsession with a totally self-contained female sexuality.’<sup>188</sup> However, Fliedl continues to note that the compositional elements serve ‘the erotic effect of the painting, which is further enhanced by its golden colours.’<sup>189</sup> In this emphasis on eroticism, despite an attempt to remove the scene depicted from its narrative source, there is another clear instance of the association between gold, nudity and a sexualised male gaze, as with iterations of Frida Kahlo’s gold dusted body following the tram crash which lead to her trauma. Fliedl continues to assert that given Danaë’s ‘drowsiness and sleep’,<sup>190</sup> in which she ‘can be depicted as completely wrapped up in herself and her instincts,’<sup>191</sup> Danaë is given ‘autonomy from the viewer.’<sup>192</sup> This is a false reading, given the myriad of fairy tale renditions of assault on a woman sleeping in the name of love, and masculine heroism (such as in the many incarnations of *Snow White* and Aurora of *Sleeping Beauty*)

Much like the image of Kahlo gilded in the gold spilt from a passenger, the image of a sleeping Danaë, invaded by the gold shower of Zeus, merges beauty with pain and horror—the gold acting as a second skin, coating the body. However, in Benson’s poetry, gold takes on a symbolic meaning much closer to that of greed, power and corruption—particularly in the allusion to Donald Trump. ‘[Zeus: Danaë],’<sup>193</sup> opens with a reference to Trump Tower:

#### I LOVE THIS PRESIDENT

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<sup>186</sup> Fliedl, p. 208.

<sup>187</sup> Fliedl, p. 208.

<sup>188</sup> Fliedl, p. 208.

<sup>189</sup> Fliedl, p. 208.

<sup>190</sup> Fliedl, p. 209.

<sup>191</sup> Fliedl, p. 209.

<sup>192</sup> Fliedl, p. 209.

<sup>193</sup> Benson, pp. 14-15

HIS SHINY GOLD TOWER.

REMEMBER DANAË

I CAME TO HER

AS A SHOWER OF GOLD<sup>194</sup>

The negative connotations of gold (particularly that which has been hoarded in greed) are intensified by the pro-capitalist rhetoric which pairs gold with virility, wealth with potency, before punning on the malapropism of financial currency and an electrical current:

WE TALK OF IT

AS CURRENCY

I WAS A CURRENT

RUNNING UP HER

A HARD AND MINTED

THING...<sup>195</sup>

Within the context of a woman's life, and interspersed with the '[personal]',<sup>196</sup> Zeus's voice here is sickening and repulsive. Trump is elided with Zeus in his arrogance, self-entitlement to 'grab 'em by the pussy',<sup>197</sup> and his narcissistic 'CHUTZPAH'.<sup>198</sup> Benson also demonstrates the conflation of wealth and power with consent in the eyes of the powerful—'A HARD AND MINTED/ THING',<sup>199</sup> continues to meld capital with sexual prowess, particularly in the pun on 'HARD',<sup>200</sup> and 'THING',<sup>201</sup> which intensifies the phallic imagery of the poem with euphemisms for penis.

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<sup>194</sup> Benson, p. 14.

<sup>195</sup> Benson, p. 14.

<sup>196</sup> Benson, p. 7, Benson, p. 10-11, Benson, p. 12.

<sup>197</sup> The New York Times, Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women, *The New York Times* <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>>[accessed 22 March 2021].

<sup>198</sup> Benson, p. 14.

<sup>199</sup> Benson, p. 14.

<sup>200</sup> Benson, p. 14.

<sup>201</sup> Benson, p. 14.

Benson makes this connection explicit as the line continues:

THING. HERE'S

HIS TOWER'S

GOLDEN PHALLUS<sup>202</sup>

As stated by Emily Hay, 'Throughout the collection, Benson draws clear parallels between the events of Greek mythology and our own contemporary political moment.'<sup>203</sup> This particular poem emphasises the parallels between Zeus's assertion of masculine authority through the phallic symbol of a lightning bolt, and his approval of the mortal assertion of masculinity and power through the erection of an artificial Mt Olympus upon which the capitalist rules.

I SHOULD SMITE HIM

BUT IT'S FUN

TO WATCH HIS WIFE...

...THE WORLD

IS VIOLENT AND

RIDICULOUS AND SWEET.<sup>204</sup>

Zeus's gaze is concerned with taking satisfaction in observing the powerful behave in egotistical ways. Benson paints a version of Zeus in which his investment in the perpetuation of hegemony is seen as a trivial, mere entertainment. For Zeus-like-figures, the experiences of the mortals, the minorities, are of lesser consequence than the satisfaction of the more powerful.

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<sup>202</sup> Benson, p. 14.

<sup>203</sup> Hay, para. 2.

<sup>204</sup> Benson, p. 14-15.

Danae is but one example of Zeus's violations recorded in Benson's poetry. Semele's fate is another example of the damage of Zeus's harmful sex drive. Zeus visits Semele under the cover of darkness. However, Hera interferes, driven by her determination 'to thwart Zeus's efforts to populate Olympus with children who are not her offspring,'<sup>205</sup> thus setting in motion the events which result in Semele's combustion. Hera tricks the 'naive princess,'<sup>206</sup> into believing that her clandestine lover is an ogre. As a result, upon their next encounter, Semele is 'unable to sustain the epiphany of Zeus in his true form as lightning—the Divine Fire itself... For a mere mortal, naked divinity—the godhead seen face-to-face—is destructive.'<sup>207</sup> The word choices of Harris and Platzner reflect the cultural reverence for the gods, and a perspective which reads this story as a means of further admiring the strength and all-consuming power of Zeus.

DID I MENTION

SEMELE? DIED

IN FLAMES,

COULDN'T BEAR MY

TRUE IMMORTAL FORM<sup>208</sup>

The idea of destruction/harm/suffering as a result of an encounter with the gloried power of the king of gods is applicable in the story of Semele, but also in that of others. That this story can evoke reverence for the immensity of Zeus's power is explained by Emily Kearns in *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*<sup>209</sup> as 'sex with a god [is put] into the context of a former time when gods and mortals sat together and shared banquets (fr 1.6-7), a privileged

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<sup>205</sup> Harris and Platzner, p. 176.

<sup>206</sup> Harris and Platzner, p. 176.

<sup>207</sup> Harris and Platzner, p. 127.

<sup>208</sup> Benson, p. 15.

<sup>209</sup> Emily Kearns 'The Nature of Heroines', in *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, ed. by Sue Blundell and Margaret Williamson (London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 96-110).

age far better than the present.’<sup>210</sup> Here nostalgia masks the suffering and pain of those who are victims to the power structures of their society. Kearns continues to reflect on the interpretations of the characters (such as ‘Dionysus’s mother, Semele,’<sup>211</sup> characterised by writers such as Harris and Platzner by her relation to her son first and foremost), explaining that ‘such heroines are remembered for glory rather than shame.’<sup>212</sup>

Despite the above, Zeus is ‘god of moral law and order, protector of suppliants and punisher of guilt... he is also god of social virtues’<sup>213</sup> in the words of Andrew S. Glick in the dictionary of mythology he authored. Under his rule, alongside Zeus’s own crimes, it is illustrated that there is not, in fact, a ‘punisher of guilt’.<sup>214</sup> Kearns identifies that there is no recourse in the face of assault or violence at the hands of gods—not in the cases of Daphne and Cassandra who rejected and fled the advances of gods, at least—and conclude that ‘altogether, catching the eye of a deity would seem to carry a high risk.’<sup>215</sup>

In ‘[Zeus: Semele],’<sup>216</sup> the Fuckfather continues to reflect on the lesson taken from Semele’s demise:

BEST TO DRESS

AS A PEACOCK A

BULL A STAG A SWAN

WHEN YOU WALK

AMONGST HUMANS

ESPECIALLY IF

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<sup>210</sup> Kearns, p. 103.

<sup>211</sup> Kearns, p. 127.

<sup>212</sup> Kearns, p. 103.

<sup>213</sup> Andrew S. Glick, *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Gods, Goddesses, Demigods and Other Subjects in Greek and Roman Mythology* (Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), p. 131.

<sup>214</sup> Glick, p. 131.

<sup>215</sup> Kearns, p. 103.

<sup>216</sup> Benson, p. 15.

YOU WANT

TO GET A GIRL<sup>217</sup>

In using this flippant tone for Zeus's perspective, Fiona Benson demonstrates the casual dismissal by rapists of the severity of their actions. This can be seen in the reference to the 2015 *People v. Turner* case, in which Brock Turner was convicted of sexual assault.

However, the language that surrounded the case sought to minimise the perceived harm to Chanel Miller<sup>218</sup> due to Turner's athletic ability, and the subsequent social status he holds as a sportsperson.

#### The Failure of Justice

The notion that the perpetrator's life prospects are taken into consideration in the application of punishment, regardless of the inevitable lifelong impact of rape and rape trauma on the victim is shown by both Benson's '[Zeus: Semele]',<sup>219</sup> and *People v. Turner*. In an interview with Chanel Miller, the unconscious victim of Turner's actions, Emma Brockes outlines the case as below:

'Around midnight on 17 January 2015, Miller was spotted by two students at Stanford University being sexually assaulted by a third student as she lay unconscious on the ground behind some bins....What happened next has become a textbook example of the double standards applied to sexual assault victims and their assailants. While Turner was characterised as a champion swimmer, conscientious student and upstanding young man surely incapable of assault, Miller became the "drunk girl at the party".<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Benson, p. 15.

<sup>218</sup> Chanel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir* (New York: Viking, 2019).

<sup>219</sup> Benson, p. 15.

<sup>220</sup> Emma Brockes, 'Chanel Miller on why she refuses to be reduced to the 'Brock Turner sexual assault victim'', *The Guardian*, 25 September 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/25/stanford-sexual-assault-victim-chanel-miller-i-nterview>> [accessed 13 January 2021].



Miller became typecast as an equal participant in the act, much like Danaë and Sleeping Beauty are.

In '[archives] Zeus given light sentence',<sup>221</sup> Benson emphasises the lack of severity in consequence for the accused Zeus/Turner/rapists at large:

Zeus given  
light sentence,  
temporary gaol.  
The judge delivers  
that he is an exemplary member  
of the swimming squad;  
look at his muscular shoulders,  
the way he forges through the water;  
as for the girl<sup>222</sup>

In opening the last line with a conjunction, indicating a compound sentence whereby cause and effect may be illustrated, Benson emulates the lack of consideration for the impacts of rape on the 'girl',<sup>223</sup> placed as secondary to the description of the strengths and assets of the perpetrator (reflected in the outcome of the Turner case, and many like it). While Benson reflects the voice of Turner's father, and his defence in detailing the perceived redeeming qualities of Zeus/Turner, the final sentence remains a fragment. There is no subordinate clause, there is no detailing of the impact on the girl. Without a full stop the poem's ending is cavernous—an abyss of the unspoken.

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<sup>221</sup> Benson, p. 6.

<sup>222</sup> Benson, p. 6.

<sup>223</sup> Benson, p. 6.

Benson extends the critique of the justice system in '[forensics]',<sup>224</sup> touching on the difficulty of attaining forensic evidence in rape trials where the presence of 'Zeus's cells',<sup>225</sup> does not preclude the counter argument of consent. In lieu of denying the act, defenses seek to redefine the act in line with victim blaming: "she was asking for it." In the opening stanza of [forensics],<sup>226</sup> Benson continues to weave connotations of power into male biology, framing the 'cells',<sup>227</sup> as 'comet-tailed',<sup>228</sup> as sperm. While the comet imagery parallels the tadpole shape of a sperm cell, it also holds cosmic associations. Zeus's sperm is otherworldly, is celestial and godly, which is canonically accurate for an examination of the mythological figure of Zeus and can be extended to the archetype which Benson's poetry attacks.

As the Zeus of *Vertigo & Ghost*<sup>229</sup> is simultaneously a 'rebranding',<sup>230</sup> of the mythological figure, and an analogous figure which stands in for the Zeus-like men throughout history, Benson's poetry also attacks systemic injustices and critiques the inadequacies of trials which, despite evidence, allow perpetrators of sexual violence to either walk free, or meet light sentences. Zeus's sperm is not only associated with godliness, but the motif of gold returns again symbolising how the power of wealth acts as immunity against conviction.

Zeus's cells  
under the lens  
comet-tailed  
and coursing gold.  
Corrosive.

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<sup>224</sup> Benson, pp. 21-22.

<sup>225</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>226</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>227</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>228</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>229</sup> Benson.

<sup>230</sup> Hay, para. 2.

Legion.<sup>231</sup>

Often conceptualised as a biological product which is innately male, essentially masculine, the sperm is imbued with the value of gold. While this is not Zeus in the form of a golden shower visiting Danaë, it is his essence, ‘coursing’,<sup>232</sup> pulsing, vibrating with the connotative value and richness of that which is correlated to the ‘*HARD AND MINTED / THING*’,<sup>233</sup> – the golden phallus, the lauded penis.

The destructive quality of reverence for the male reproductive anatomy is held in the adjective ‘corrosive’,<sup>234</sup> and ‘legion’,<sup>235</sup> speak to the proliferation of the destructive potential of Zeus’s hypothetical sons in the millions of sperm in one drop of ejaculate. In contemporary usage, “legion” denotes a large volume, however the word originates in the military conquests of ancient Rome whereby it is ‘a military organization, originally the largest permanent organization in the armies of ancient Rome. The term legion also denotes the military system by which imperial Rome conquered and ruled the ancient world.’<sup>236</sup> Benson’s use of ‘legion’,<sup>237</sup> as opposed to synonyms such as “horde”, “mass” or “throng” holds this connotative battle, the associations of military invasion which parallels the invasive and violent conception of heteronormative sex whereby sexual exploits with women are colloquially deemed “conquests”, and men are cast as predators, and women their prey.

The destructive power of ‘Zeus’s cells’,<sup>238</sup> is intensified further in the second stanza which describes the damage to the forensic investigator ‘She’<sup>239</sup>:

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<sup>231</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>232</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>233</sup> Benson, p. 14.

<sup>234</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>235</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>236</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, *Legion*, (Encyclopædia Britannica Online, 2020), Britannica Academic <<https://academic-eb-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/levels/collegiate/article/legion/47638>> [accessed March 2021].

<sup>237</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>238</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>239</sup> Benson, p. 21.

She staggers back  
from the microscope  
her lab-coat flapping  
like a wounded swan  
clutching her eye,  
burned and acid-blind;

The wounding and blinding of the woman scientist continues as Benson emphasise the damage that investigation into rape allegations can cause within a system which rarely leads to justice.

its retina  
stark in her face,  
a moon  
she will not patch,  
its wrinkled sclera  
like egg skin,  
  
or milky cellophane,  
its inward watch –<sup>240</sup>

The figurative imagery of wounded vision can be extended to reflect the ways in which the wound is never one thing, rather a myriad, it is layer upon layer of pain expressed through animalistic association (as in the image of the ‘wounded swan’,<sup>241</sup>). Her vision becomes abstract, a ‘moon’,<sup>242</sup> ‘cellophane’,<sup>243</sup> or an ‘egg’,<sup>244</sup> and is removed from the human

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<sup>240</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>241</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>242</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>243</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>244</sup> Benson, p. 21.

(conceived of as rational and intelligent). In placing evidence of Zeus's crimes under a 'microscope',<sup>245</sup> Benson illustrates the ways in which this act causes harm to those involved in holding power to account, before drawing on the perspective of a forensic scientist in examining rape evidence. The 'she',<sup>246</sup> of '[forensics]',<sup>247</sup> 'staggers back',<sup>248</sup>

'the way she sometimes

sees the woman

before she bends

to the evidence,

down to what she

was wearing, or

the soil,

or the riverbed,

down to the very last things

she needed to tell.<sup>249</sup>

The concept of 'bend[ing] to the evidence',<sup>250</sup> is an insidious reference to the ways in which regardless of the presence of biological evidence of the occurrence of a sex(ually violent) act, the nature of the women's consent may be misconstrued in line with victim blaming. The notion that a women's choice of outfit may be implied to communicate consent (where it is not expressly given) and the question of where a woman was at the time of the incident can reflect the ways in which women are advised to avoid rape. The idea that woman's place is in

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<sup>245</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>246</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>247</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>248</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>249</sup> Benson, pp. 21-22.

<sup>250</sup> Benson, p. 21.

the home, not on public ‘soil’,<sup>251</sup> or at a ‘riverbed’,<sup>252</sup> that by simply stepping out of her “place” in clothing deemed undignified, or enticing to an uncontrollable male desire is strongly critiqued by Benson in ‘[forensics]’.<sup>253</sup>

Early in Part One, Benson intersperses three ‘[personal]’,<sup>254</sup> poems where the narrative voice of the collection, the girl from ‘Ace of Bass’,<sup>255</sup> the woman on the other side of the ‘bullet-proof glass’,<sup>256</sup> speaks of the incident ‘on your own familiar sheets’.<sup>257</sup> In ‘[personal] Rape is rarely what you think’,<sup>258</sup> there is no first-person pronoun in the poem, rather the pronoun ‘you’.<sup>259</sup> However, this is not indicative of second-person perspective, rather it begins as personal address as the narrator states:

Rape is rarely  
what you think.<sup>260</sup>

The personal address of ‘you’,<sup>261</sup> challenges the reader directly to reconsider the definitional bounds of rape, and offers a counternarrative to pervasive rape myths in our cultural consciousness. The ‘you’,<sup>262</sup> then slips. The narrative voice is no longer direct address, rather an address to the poet’s past self:

Sometimes you are  
outside yourself  
looking down  
thinking *slut*<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Benson, p. 21.

<sup>252</sup> Benson, p. 22.

<sup>253</sup> Benson, pp. 21-22.

<sup>254</sup> Benson, p. 7., Benson, p. 10-11., Benson, p. 12.

<sup>255</sup> Benson, p. 1.

<sup>256</sup> Benson, p. 5.

<sup>257</sup> Benson, p. 7.

<sup>258</sup> Benson, p. 7.

<sup>259</sup> Benson, p. 7.

<sup>260</sup> Benson, p. 7.

<sup>261</sup> Benson, p. 7.

<sup>262</sup> Benson, p. 7.

<sup>263</sup> Benson, p. 7.

This retrospective self-degradation is a representation of the dissociative realm of the memory of trauma and abuse. The out of body experience being described indicates a distancing between the body that experienced the assault, and the splitting of self that many endurers of trauma adopt in an attempt to cope. This splitting of self is exemplified further in Benson's five '[transformation]'<sup>264</sup> poems whereby she 'rebrand[s]'<sup>265</sup> the dehumanisation of the mythological women in their animalistic transfiguration post assault is referred to by Self as a situation where 'the metamorphosis becomes an attempt to hide from their rapist or the post-traumatic change they suffer after him.'<sup>266</sup> The use of the word '*slut*'<sup>267</sup> reflects the misogynistic language that is weaponised to blame the victim, and redeem the perpetrator, while the italicisation visually emphasises the word on the page in a way which reflects the cultural significance of the word as a misogynistic slur. Much like Petit's portrayal of the disruption of time inherent in a trauma flashback, Benson here disrupts linear time through tense. The 'sometimes'<sup>268</sup> reflects the ways in which the experience of a traumatic event will not remain in the past, it resurfaces sometimes, and the present tense 'are'<sup>269</sup> depicts the immediacy of a flashback experience.

The imminent and permanent threat of Zeus's violence against women is returned to throughout Part One of the collection. Benson intersperses the transcriptions of Zeus's rumbling voiced self-vindication with '[personal]'<sup>270</sup> entries, and entries with a limited omniscient third person such as '[closed circuit] Zeus in the electric chair'<sup>271</sup> which further emphasise the failings of the criminal justice system. The interspersion of these elements is illustrative of the pervasiveness of both the rates of sexual violence in the lives of women,

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<sup>264</sup> Benson, p.13, Benson, pp. 16-17, Benson, p. 25, Benson, pp. 31-32, Benson, pp. 35-36.

<sup>265</sup> Hay, para. 2.

<sup>266</sup> Self, para. 2.

<sup>267</sup> Benson, p. 7.

<sup>268</sup> Benson, p. 7.

<sup>269</sup> Benson, p. 7.

<sup>270</sup> Benson, p. 7., Benson, p. 10-11., Benson, p. 12.

<sup>271</sup> Benson, p. 30.

and the pervasive nature of trauma in the brain, body, mind and self of the rape survivor and trauma endurer. Despite the discipline and punishment administered to Zeus (much like the inadequate punitive measures given to real life rapists), nothing changes. Zeus remains a threat, embodies that which women fear in spite of measures taken to supposedly control and mitigate violence against women.

[closed circuit]

Zeus in the electric chair.

Madcapped, zapped,

at home in the lightning

no way to kill him,

monstrous, jiggered, laughing.<sup>272</sup>

Zeus takes masochistic delight in this electrocution, this ineffectual death sentence which is similar to his reported delight in the taze of the ankle band from '[archives] Zeus on parole.'<sup>273</sup> Zeus is portrayed as untouchable—'monstrous, jiggered, laughing.'<sup>274</sup> This characterisation continues the mocking of the justice system, and offers a satiric take on the judicial process whereby even those who do meet retribution, are not harmed in the same way as the plaintive endurer of sexual assault. This is particularly poignant in that it reflects the manner in which court proceedings are 'the second rape.'<sup>275</sup> Yes, the immortal Zeus is inevitably "above" the law and order of "man", and while the same retribution taken against mortal rapists would be one of finality, of ultimate consequence, this stanza functions as a metaphor for the near impossibility of legal remedy for violations in contemporary societies – as highlighted by the Turner case.

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<sup>272</sup> Benson, p. 30.

<sup>273</sup> Benson, p. 6.

<sup>274</sup> Benson, p. 6.

<sup>275</sup> Gamble and Maddigan.



## Apollo and Poseidon

The proliferation of Zeus's crimes against women are not the full extent of the pervasive threat of sexual violence against women of classical mythology. Poseidon and Apollo each feature as rapist men in *Vertigo & Ghost*,<sup>276</sup> while Athena is characterised as a woman complicit in the perpetuation of violent retribution against victims. Medusa was a human woman prior to her transformation into a gorgon, and the misdirected retribution by Athena was her downfall. In the classical cannon, Medusa's rape is not labelled as such.

Glick outlines Medusa's punishment by Athena, who transformed her hair into snakes because she had 'violated'<sup>277</sup> her sanctuary. Gods and goddesses alike played with human lives in their bids for power. Medusa's story is well known and has been adapted into pop culture – most notably in Rick Riordin's *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*<sup>278</sup> where she remains a villainous figure. According to legend, following her perceived indiscretion which results in a splitting of self, a transformation, she is slain, decapitated and taken as a trophy. According to Apollodorus, 'there are some who say that Medusa lost her head because of Athene—for they say that the Gorgon had claimed to rival the goddess in beauty.'<sup>279</sup> This violation is outlined in a 1922 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, edited by Brookes More:

Fame declares  
the Sovereign of the Sea attained her  
love in chaste Minerva's temple....  
To punish that great crime  
minerva changed the Gorgon's splendid hair

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<sup>276</sup> Benson.

<sup>277</sup> Glick, p. 78.

<sup>278</sup> *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, dir. by Chris Columbus and Thor Freudenthal (20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios, 2010) [DVD], Riordin, Rick, *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (London: Puffin, 2005).

<sup>279</sup> J. G. Frazer 'Apollodorus: The Library' in *The Loeb Classical Library*, ed. by Capps, E., Page T. E., Rouse W. H. D. (London: William Heinemann, 1921).

to serpents horrible.<sup>280</sup>

Another translation of the same text, by Henry T. Riley in 1893 retains the reference to Poseidon as sovereign of the sea, though emphasises “virginity” in line 91; ‘The sovereign of the sea is said to have deflowered her in the Temple of Minerva.’<sup>281</sup> In each of these translations (and many more), the nature of the sex act in Athena’s temple is ambiguous in terms of consent, however, what is apparent is Athena’s retaliation and retribution against Medusa rather than Poseidon. If non-consensual, this demonstrates victim blaming, and if not, demonstrates the targeted blaming of a woman for the actions of a more powerful man/god involved. Benson, however, does not mince her words, instead she directly labels Poseidon’s actions as rape:

Poseidon the sea god  
raped Medusa where  
she prayed  
in the temple of Athena<sup>282</sup>

In the subsequent stanza she continues to clearly state the actions of the god and goddess concerned.

and Athena  
cursed the girl  
with a head full  
of snakes.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Ovid, trans. Brookes More, *Metamorphoses*, *Perseus Digital Library* < <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0028%3Abook%3D4%3Acard%3D706> > [accessed May 12 2020].

<sup>281</sup> Riley, Henry T., *The Metamorphoses of Ovid* (Philadelphia: Sherman & Co, 1899).

<sup>282</sup> Benson, p. 26.

<sup>283</sup> Benson, p. 26.

In this movement towards calling a rape a rape, Benson moves the conception of Medusa's origin story away from the erotic male gaze of Ovid.

Brigley Thompson canvases conceptions of the wound in reference to Derek Walcott's *The Muse of History*,<sup>284</sup> critiquing his description of the wound—'the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice',<sup>285</sup>—as 'too reminiscent of founding Western mythologies of sexual violence and rape'.<sup>286</sup> Brigley Thompson then draws on Victoria Rimmell's writing on Medusa and the language of Ovid in *Medicamina Faciei Feminae*, emphasising the regressive notions of the female reproductive system when employed by and for women and their sexuality as inherently in need of decontamination. Brigley Thompson states:

Rimmell describes Ovid's 'program for the cultivation of woman [which] seeks to sanitize and invade her sexual body, visualized as [ . . . ] a fleshy rot seeping nasty juices' (Rimmell 2005: 195)... this image of the sexualized and tainted female body is a regressive one.<sup>287</sup>

The regressive notion that the sexual/ised women's body is adulterated is one which women have been cast in 'from Ovid onwards'.<sup>288</sup> Phebe Lowell Bowditch<sup>289</sup> characterises Ovid's view of the sexualised/objectified women the corrupted female form, or feminine figure bastardised, as bestial. She characterises Ovid's narrator in *Metamorphoses* as a voice which shrouds women's suffering bodies with 'a visible surface of pain that excites the sadistic and

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<sup>284</sup> Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1998).

<sup>285</sup> Derek Walcott, p. 64.

<sup>286</sup> Brigley Thompson, p. 202.

<sup>287</sup> Brigley Thompson, p. 202.

<sup>288</sup> Brigley Thompson, p. 202.

<sup>289</sup> Bowditch, Phebe Lowell, 'Hermeneutic uncertainty and the feminine in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*: the Procris and Cephalus digression', in *Gendered Dynamics in Latin Love Poetry*, ed. by Ronnie Ancona and Ellen Greene (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 271-95.

erotic gaze of the narrator.’<sup>290</sup> The male gaze of Ovid is a basis on which subsequent representations of women’s bodies have been formed, and one which has informed the contemporary male gaze which responds in titillation to images such as Frida Kahlo dusted with gold, near death in the street. It is the same gaze that becomes aroused at the violence against women’s bodies in *Sin City*.<sup>291</sup> It is the gaze which is expressed in freely accessible pornography, where the woman is called “slut” and is manhandled into eager subservience. This casting of women is not exclusive to the pornographic, the wounded woman as an object of eroticised tragedy pervades much of popular culture to this day and is the subject of an exhaustive list of television tropes including:

- ☐ Aliens Made Them Do It
- ☐ Bathe Her and Bring Her To Me
- ☐ Bed Trick
- ☐ Broken Bird
- ☐ Bunker Woman
- ☐ But Liquor is Quicker
- ☐ Date Rape
- ☐ Date Rape Averted
- ☐ Don’t Look at Me!
- ☐ Double Standard: Rape, Divine on Mortal
- ☐ Dude, She’s Like, in a Coma!
- ☐ Fate Worse Than Death
- ☐ Forceful Kiss
- ☐ Horny Devils

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<sup>290</sup> Phebe Lowell Bowditch, p. 273.

<sup>291</sup> *Sin City*, dir. by Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez (Miramax Films, 2005) [DVD].

- Jail Bait
- Karmic STD
- Love Potion
- Might Makes Right
- Near-Rape Experience
- Post-Rape Taunt
- Prison Rape
- Rape as Backstory
- Rape Leads to Insanity
- Rape, Pillage and Burn<sup>292</sup>

The key trope that Benson subverts is ‘Double Standard: Rape, Divine on Mortal’<sup>293</sup> where ‘Rape isn't considered wrong if the rapist is a deity.’<sup>294</sup>

In *The Guardian*’s article ‘Forward prize winner Fiona Benson: ‘It’s still taboo to talk about rape and women’s bodies’’,<sup>295</sup> The interviewer, Charlotte Higgins, summarises Benson’s writing process in creating *Vertigo & Ghost*,<sup>296</sup> highlighting the vulnerability in the scathingly confessional tone. In Benson’s own words, after sending the poems ‘written in a single burst’<sup>297</sup> to her editor, she states ‘I was practically crying, because I didn’t know what he’d make of them.’<sup>298</sup> Subsequently she revisited ‘Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.’<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>292</sup>TV Tropes, Sexual Harassment and Rape Tropes, *TV Tropes* <<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SexualHarassmentAndRapeTropes>> [accessed 22 March 2021].

<sup>293</sup>TV Tropes.

<sup>294</sup>TV Tropes.

<sup>295</sup>Higgins.

<sup>296</sup>Benson.

<sup>297</sup>Higgins, para. 6.

<sup>298</sup>Higgins, para. 6.

<sup>299</sup>Higgins, para. 6.

Benson employs a similar approach to the subject of rape and the wound (whether blistering or calloused) as Petit, thus extending the applicability of Brigley Thompson's discussions of regressive representations of women's bodies as tarnished following rape, and the equally 'sadistic and erotic',<sup>300</sup> gaze of Ovid which is being subverted in the creation of a female gaze, the woman's voice in literary and pop cultural portrayals of rape, rape trauma, rape victims and perpetrators. Higgins characterises *Vertigo & Ghost*<sup>301</sup> as transformative in response to this gaze which metamorphosises, or transforms, the rape-damaged woman into a bestial being, split from her self-ness and alienated from her body. For Benson, poetic embodiment of the cast of characters raped by Zeus is a 'reforging of episodes from that work of transformations[, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,] [which] is spectacular, turning the Roman poet's sometimes voyeuristic rapes (very much seen from 'outside', and often troublingly aestheticised) inwards into the female body.'<sup>302</sup>

The distancing quality of masking the personal and confessional, and filtering them through the mythic is a callousing strategy, similar to that which is employed by Petit through the mythic biography of Frida Kahlo as it places a barrier between the personal biography of Benson's potential experience with rape culture and the reader. While this was a deliberate function of the strategy employed by Petit, it is an aspect of her writing which Benson herself problematises. In discussion with Higgins, it is evident that this is a concern for Benson's attempt to speak truth to power:

She worries, though, that the framework of myth protects the reader too much. 'It makes it safe in a way,' she says. 'I've been on Radio 4 and they want me to talk about myth but they do not want to hear, or feel they cannot broadcast, some of the transformations because they are so bodily. It's still taboo to talk about rape and

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<sup>300</sup> Phebe Lowell Bowditch, p. 273.

<sup>301</sup> Benson.

<sup>302</sup> Higgins, para. 6.

women's bodies that way. So part of me feels like I have given people a safe way to think about it – and I'm not sure I want them to feel like that.'<sup>303</sup>

Higgins asserts a counterpoint: 'I wonder if the obverse is true, that by plugging into the matrix of myth the reader is given a means to confront what would otherwise be impossibly raw.'<sup>304</sup> Here the use of the word 'raw'<sup>305</sup> neatly parallels the assertion that Benson's work encapsulates the wound beneath the blister. Her poetry is the fresh and unhealed skin once the blister has burst. Her poetry is the burn and sting of air against that which is exposed.

'[transformation: Daphne]'<sup>306</sup> illustrates the seemingly eternal nature of the threat of rape for women in society. If it is not the king of gods himself (or the many iterations of the Zeus archetype throughout literary and pop cultural history; or the many iterations of the Zeus archetype in living and dead men throughout history), then it is his son (Apollo), or his brother (Poseidon). Either way, Benson illustrates through the '[not-Zeus:]'<sup>307</sup> and '[transformation:]'<sup>308</sup> poems that the cast of powerful men connected with Zeus hold a similar immunity to discipline.

Who roots, flares into leaf, becomes tree.

But in the change before the change

Zeus's son courses her like a hound

And Daphne is a hare, trying to leap free.

The full, terrifying scope of the threat of dangerous rapist men is illustrated in Daphne's poem in analogy between her fleeing and dog racing, in which 'Daphne is a hare'<sup>309</sup> chased by the dogs with 'handlers.'<sup>310</sup> Zeus is not removed from the equation, Benson places him

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<sup>303</sup> Higgins, para. 7.

<sup>304</sup> Higgins, para. 7.

<sup>305</sup> Higgins, para. 7.

<sup>306</sup> Benson, p. 31-32.

<sup>307</sup> Benson, p. 26.

<sup>308</sup> Benson, p. 13., Benson, p. 16-17., Benson, p. 25., Benson, p. 31-32, Benson, p. 35-36.

<sup>309</sup> Benson, p. 31.

<sup>310</sup> Benson, p. 31.

‘...behind the scenes:/ his electric-shock collar, his snippets of meat.’<sup>311</sup> Again the electrical current of power (in both senses of the word) is associated with Zeus, and vicariously by his sons. Although the dogs are leashed, they are first enabled to chase the hare.

Daphne ‘rejects both men and marriage’<sup>312</sup> and therefore denies Apollo’s romantic interest. Apollo appears as a persistent predator in his chasing of women. Before Apollo, Daphne was ‘pursued first by Leucippus.’<sup>313</sup> Apollo ‘Burn[s] with futile love for Daphne’<sup>314</sup> as he is driven by an insatiable desire for her as a result of being shot with Cupid’s arrow. This mirrors the rhetoric that men are unable to help themselves, unable to restrain their erotic whims, and that assault as a result of desire (much like that of Turner) is understandable, is a given as a component of masculinity. While Zeus’s drive is consistent, Apollo’s is (in this instance at least) the result of manipulation by the gods. Ultimately, Daphne is turned into a laurel tree by her father. Daphne’s story is not about her, merely, it is ‘an etiological tale explaining why the laurel leaves thereafter remain sacred to Apollo.’<sup>315</sup> In Ovid’s text, Daphne’s story is not her own, it is the origin story of the Olympic laurel wreath. The persistent theme of fleeing, of being chased is vivid in the mythology which features Daphne. Her ongoing suffering, unescapable as a human woman, is illustrated in the lines

...she’s at the edge of her wits,  
retching with fear, and he is *everywhere*,  
stumbling her up, ahead of her, above<sup>316</sup>

The repetitive, all-consuming nature of the threat demonstrated in this poem is emphasised further in the reading by Benson at the T. S. Eliot Prize Shortlist Readings<sup>317</sup> where she

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<sup>311</sup> Benson, p. 31.

<sup>312</sup> Harris and Platzner, p. 939.

<sup>313</sup> Glick, p. 32.

<sup>314</sup> Harris and Platzner, p. 939.

<sup>315</sup> Harris and Platzner, p. 939.

<sup>316</sup> Benson, p. 31.

<sup>317</sup> T. S. Eliot Prize.



delivers the poem from title and first line, through to the penultimate line, before returning to the fifth line of the poem where ‘That day at the races’<sup>318</sup> begins again. Benson retains the slow and steady rhythm of delivery in each presentation which holds no stanzas or line breaks. The chase and fleeing is perpetual, repetitive, and culminates in the final line the second time through where Zeus, holds a light steady for Apollo, ‘keeping it steady for the rape, and then the kill.’<sup>319</sup> This same light produced by Zeus is the ‘bright light, / this dazzle in her eyes, that won’t let her sleep’,<sup>320</sup> and illuminates the all-consuming fear characteristic of those who have endured trauma, or a threat to their bodily autonomy, whilst demonstrating the immense possibility of poetry in inscribing the traumatic experience of rape.

In Benson’s ‘vulcanised and screaming’ narrative voice in *Vertigo & Ghost*<sup>321</sup> is a withering awareness of the patriarchy in shaping and wounding young women. Benson draws on viscera, pulls together vivid and evocative imagery, dissolved amongst western archetypes. Meanwhile, Petit draws on imagery and symbols equally as vivid, and channels this through the art of Frida Kahlo. Figurative allusion is a tool through which poets can speak trauma, whether that be analogy in the case of Petit, or allegory in the case of Benson.

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<sup>318</sup>T. S. Eliot Prize, Benson, p. 31.

<sup>319</sup>T. S. Eliot Prize, Benson, p. 32.

<sup>320</sup>T. S. Eliot Prize, Benson, p. 31.

<sup>321</sup>Benson.

## Chapter Two: Smirk & Satirise

*A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval... there's no other way... it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter.<sup>1</sup>*

– ‘*The Laugh of the Medusa*’, Hélène Cixous

Helen Cixous's claim about the explosive and subversive power is laughter is at the centre of the poetry of Vanessa Place and Patricia Lockwood. For these poets, as for Benson and Petit, rape is a trauma that wounds and scars, but in this chapter attention turns to the poetic strategy of dark and satiric humour to give voice to this pain. Laughter in the face of danger characterises the poetic approaches of Vanessa Place and Patricia Lockwood to the rape joke. Vanessa Place's delivery is calloused, but not cold as she dares the audience to find entertainment in rape jokes in public in a way which is split from the way they may engage with the same jokes in private. Her voice when performing the jokes is hardened, but not inexpressive. Patricia Lockwood, on the other hand, writes a confessional poem on the rape joke, her humour blisters, and the personal wounding is on the page.

### The Rape Joke as a Site of Subversion

Rape jokes are generally offensive, given that they deal with such a taboo topic, and generally seek to create an impact through a transgression of what is accepted as polite behaviour. Rape jokes tend to lean on their shock factor to elicit a response.

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<sup>1</sup> Cixous, p. 888.

Rape is the essence of unfreedom, the vicissitudes of force, so how can we be free to joke about this? What limit does this provoke us to try and impose, inviting, against our conscious will, a new mode of transgression? Another round of tragedy?<sup>2</sup>

The concept of symbolic violence is useful in understanding the existence of rape jokes in a society characterised by gender binary where high rates of sexual assault against women persist at the hands of men. Here, heterosexual masculinity is considered dominant while femininity, and women are considered as the dominated. Ian Buchanan defines symbolic violence as follows:

[Symbolic violence is] Pierre Bourdieu's term for the process whereby the dominant social class impose their ideology on the dominated classes. To put it another way, it theorizes the form hegemony takes when it is achieved. The dominant class legitimizes its own class interests in the eyes of the dominated classes by giving them the appearance of the naturally right.<sup>3</sup>

Rape jokes as a cultural text evidence sexist dominant discourses, and allow examination of the hegemonic social relations. Through rape jokes and victim blaming, masculine aggression/violence are normalised as "naturally right". The concept of symbolic violence is also useful in examining the subject/object split inherent in the rape joke format as it mimics the dominant/dominated dichotomy as outlined above.

A particularly poignant joke identified by Proulx as an example of a stand up comedian delivering a feminist rape joke hinges on the idea of doubt or disbelief, and the legal or journalistic scepticism of the jargon "alleged". The joke of concern comes from a stand up set delivered by Heather Jordan Ross, 'a sexual violence survivor who joked about

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<sup>2</sup> Webster, Jamieson, 'The Rape Joke as Ur-Joke', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 18.4 (2017), 269-73 <<https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/full/10.1080/15240657.2017.1383071?src=recsys>> [accessed 7 August 2020], p. 269.

<sup>3</sup> Buchanan, Ian, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Oxford Reference <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/view/10.1093/acref/9780198794790.001.0001/acref-9780198794790-e-689>> [accessed 7 June 2020].

her experiences at the 2016 Canada wide ‘Rape is Real and Everywhere’ tour.’<sup>4</sup> The legal convention of applying “alleged” acts to infer objectivity in discourse. While false conviction, or wrongful slander of an alleged rapist who was innocent is deplorable, when applied to an interpersonal context (such as between the perpetrator and the victim of rape), the legal status of “alleged” does little to help the victim. It may be read as a kind of denial or dismissal, comparable to silencing. This language results in the event going unacknowledged, classified as an untruth or a non-truth, incongruous with known bodily knowledge of the event that the trauma endure holds. The joke reads as follows,

One of the reasons it takes so long to identify yourself as a victim is because this incredible doubt comes into play because you only hear one story, right? Gal in the bushes...I used to be a journalist so I started calling [my sexual assault] my ‘alleged sexual assault’ (pause) and then I started correcting myself, one day I was like ‘oh ya...I was there’.<sup>5</sup>

In ‘Shameless Comedy: investigating shame as an exposure effect of contemporary sexist and feminist rape jokes’,<sup>6</sup> Melanie Proulx discusses stand up comedy in terms of feminist and misogynist rape jokes. Her observations of Heather Jordan Ross’s stand up can be discussed as similarly controversial to Patricia Lockwood’s *Rape Joke*<sup>7</sup> because ‘the butt of her jokes... usually end[s] up being herself, a victim of sexual violence. However, even though Ross pokes fun at herself, she does so for being the product of rape culture and thus laughs at rape culture too.’<sup>8</sup>

In examining stand up comedy, Proulx states

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<sup>4</sup> Melanie Proulx, ‘Shameless comedy: investigating shame as an exposure effect of contemporary sexist and feminist rape jokes’, *Comedy Studies*, 2 (2018), 183-99. P. 193.

<sup>5</sup> Proulx, p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Proulx.

<sup>7</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>8</sup> Proulx, p. 194.

Interestingly, a lot [of] sexist jokes downplay the trauma or seriousness of rape... the comedians attempt to dismiss women by making them seem overdramatic in the eyes of their male counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

Proulx continues to cite the following positive outcome of catharsis for ‘feminist women’<sup>10</sup> as a result of ‘enjoy[ing] rape jokes which subvert rape culture.’<sup>11</sup> This juxtaposition creates tension without subverting the script. In regard to Vanessa Place’s *You Had To Be There*, Natasha Stagg identifies that there are two sides to the rape joke coin:

In the back and forth between feminist and misogynist humor [sic], each side attempts to reveal the other as farcical, by meme-ifying, simplifying, or recontextualizing [sic] its values, its “rapes”.<sup>12</sup>

The other side of this coin allows the rape joke to also hold feminist messaging. The attribution of misogyny to rape jokes is not absolute, as it depends on the audience, the context, and the scope and target of the joke itself. Likewise, the aspects of audience, context, scope and target apply to the attribution of feminism to rape jokes. The perspective that, like any text form, jokes on the broad topic of rape are not *inherently* anything underpins the reading of rape jokes in a way which may or may not subvert dominant discourses. This perspective emphasises an audience’s ideological positioning in interpreting common thematic trends in the rape joke as delivered by popular stand up comedians as misogynist, or as “just a joke” which can do no harm.

However, when the scope is social and the target is the perpetrator, the joke does not function to replicate the nonconsent and threat of a rape joke in both structure and message as the inverse does, rather it critiques the structures in which these norms are created. In these cases, it is more specifically a rape *culture* joke, or a joke about a rapist—hypothetical or

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<sup>9</sup> Proulx, p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> Proulx, p. 193.

<sup>11</sup> Proulx, p. 193.

<sup>12</sup> Place, p. 143-145.

otherwise. These kinds of jokes, often drawing on satire, parody, or mockery utilise humour in subversive ways which differ from that achieved through comedy in poetic texts, although they do occupy a similar space in message.

Gayle Salamon, in ‘What Do We Learn About Rape Jokes From Rape Jokes About Rape Jokes?’<sup>13</sup>, separates what Proulx terms feminist rape jokes as rather jokes about rape culture. Salamon continues to discuss a popular culture-based rape joke. The joke in question took place at a Hollywood entertainment industry awards show prior to the #metoo movement, in 2015. The joke was delivered in two parts by hosts Tina Fey and Amy Poehler at the 2015 Golden Globes, where they parodied Bill Cosby’s denial of allegations of drugging and raping others. Salamon cites Bill Cosby as responding to ‘the allegations of rape by calling them “a joke”.’<sup>14</sup> Here the concept of a rape allegation being a “joke” further expands what we might mean when we use the term rape joke. While Salamon provides no absolute, nor definitive answer regarding the morality of rape jokes, she discusses the potential benefits of Fey’s joke delivery ‘in the voice of Bill Cosby, exaggerating his characteristic emphases and plosives’<sup>15</sup> and Poehler’s ‘even broader impression of Crosby’<sup>16</sup> which serves to emphasise an implied belief that the allegations are not a joke, in fact they are a truth to be belittled through ridicule.

If a tendentious joke expresses something that is otherwise unutterable, and if such an utterance is accompanied by the rush of pleasure that attends the lifting of repression, then we can see how something that would not seem to be a joke at all can behave like one.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Salamon, Gayle, ‘What Do we Learn About Rape Jokes About Rape Jokes?’, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 18.4 (2017), 277-80 <<https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/full/10.1080/15240657.2017.1383069>> [30 March 2020].

<sup>14</sup>Salamon, p. 278.

<sup>15</sup>Salamon, p. 278.

<sup>16</sup>Salamon, p. 279.

<sup>17</sup>Salamon, p. 279.

In describing this joke by two comedians who are women (if not feminist comedians, or comedians who are feminist) as tendentious, Salamon highlights the ways in which this was a controversial thing to say in that it made fun of an alleged rapist drugging and victimising others.

The public context is of interest, as the allegations are only alluded to through inference regarding the signifier of the pill in both Fey and Poehler's impersonations. The joke is to parody *Cosby* and imply a breach in consent with an admission that he 'put the pills in the people',<sup>18</sup> the connotation of the verb phrase "put in" links to language use surrounding heterosexual penetrative intercourse. The repetition of the word 'pills',<sup>19</sup> and phrase 'put them in the people',<sup>20</sup> emphasises the repetition of allegations against him for putting both pills and his penis in people without consent. Even when humour is used to draw attention to a social injustice (the use of drugs in sexual coercion), there is contextual significance which creates a serious tone. While rape jokes are very much a part of stand up comedy, they are out of context at a formal event. This feminist message was delivered on a forum which protects the industry's status quo, designed to protect the Harvey Weinstein type, the Donald Trump type and promote their product/ions.

Salamon discusses consent in relation to the rape joke, where the relationship between teller and listener is one which parallels with the two sides of an incident of assault where the teller is the aggressor, or perpetrator, and the passive receiver of the joke is the 'victim', or as she articulates, 'So you or I who do not want to hear the rape joke are analogized to the one who is raped, the one whose refusal of consent is what makes the sexual act rape.'<sup>21</sup> This is in specific reference to one of Place's jokes which incorporates an ignored "no" into the structure of the joke. She states that 'This piece takes as its subject rape jokes in which the

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<sup>18</sup>Salamon, p. 278.

<sup>19</sup>Salamon, p. 278.

<sup>20</sup>Salamon, p. 279.

<sup>21</sup>Salamon, p. 277.

rape joke itself is thematized.<sup>22</sup> It reads as follows, ‘Who wants to play a rape game? No? That’s the spirit./ Who wants to hear a rape joke? No? That’s the spirit.’ Salamon explains that ‘This joke is structured like a rape because the refusal *-no?*- comes as the joke is already in process.’<sup>23</sup> Salamon examines the function of the titular rape jokes about rape jokes in close reading these lines from *You Had To Be There*,<sup>24</sup> identifying their capacity of the rape joke to represent the concept of rape itself.

This semantic difference, where the rape joke’s focus is the rape joke itself allows for a focus on the culture that is forum for rape jokes to be told. With the thematization of rape, where the perpetrator of rape jokes and/or perpetrators of rape itself are the target, jokes allow for a feminist, satirical reading. This is a particularly effective strategy in satirising rape culture when employed by poets.

In ‘Rape Jokes: Laugh Till You Cry’,<sup>25</sup> Virginia Goldner states, ‘The action of the joke depends upon whether we can identify, even momentarily, with the agentic, loquacious, sociopathic, comedic speaker—and whether that enthrallment will make it possible to ignore the woman he has left moaning on the floor.’<sup>26</sup> So what is the appeal in rape jokes as poetry? Is it the trivialisation? Or the endorsement? The condemnation? The perpetuation? One appeal may be that it highlights the insidious nature of rape culture without flinching. There is a sustained display of patriarchal beliefs in the superiority of men (particularly white, or in powerful position such as that of a religious figure, or adult) over women, particularly women of different ethnicities (and/or children) to an implied white joker. It is this acknowledgement of an unbearable truth that allows poets to co-opt the structure and concept of the rape joke in

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<sup>22</sup>Place, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup>Salamon, p. 277.

<sup>24</sup>Place.

<sup>25</sup>Virginia Goldner, ‘Rape Jokes: Laugh Till You Cry’, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 18.4 (2017), 294-8  
<<https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/full/10.1080/15240657.2017.1383058>> [accessed 3 October 2020].

<sup>26</sup>Goldner, p. 295.



order to speak the experience of rape and rape trauma which is steeped in misogynistic messaging and narratives of a women's 'place' in society.

In *You Had To Be There*,<sup>27</sup> there is an ambiguity of messaging regarding the morality of rape jokes in and of themselves, Place merely identifies the form, as shown in the varying titles of the iterations of the script across performance and page. Within the text, Place does not draw attention to the 'rape joke' as subject matter, while Lockwood ends on this note, directly questioning the place for humour/comedy (as referenced by the phrase 'rape jokes') in discussing rape, rape trauma and rape culture.

Vanessa Place recontextualises rape jokes into a found poem for the stage (printed in 2018 as *You Had To Be There*)<sup>28</sup> It is not in the form of an open mic night, or a stand up gig, it is an art performance. Patricia Lockwood's poem, *Rape Joke*,<sup>29</sup> appropriates the cultural phenomenon of the rape joke in form and content. While each text uses humour and punchlines (or the concept of the punchline), the tone in each is far from jovial or celebratory. Vanessa Place and Patricia Lockwood's texts allow interrogation of the semantic nuances of the rape joke, elucidate the cultural context in which the jokes originate, and highlight the subsequent effect when rape jokes are delivered by a poet. Place utilises recontextualisation, while Lockwood relies on aphorism in her satirisation of the personified 'rape joke',<sup>30</sup> the 'he',<sup>31</sup> symbolic of the character who raped the narrator of the poem.

One important question in analysing the power imbalance of the joke format, where not only is someone or something the punchline, but there are questions of consent in the relationship between teller and listener: *who* is the punchline? Another focus when examining jokes through a power imbalance lens is: does the punchline punch up or down the power

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<sup>27</sup>Place.

<sup>28</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>29</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>30</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>31</sup>Lockwood.

hierarchy? Who is placed as the “authority” to be transgressed? There are also themes which link Place’s jokes together and link the jokes (and performance) to the societal context/s in which these ideas commonly manifest.

In 2013, Patricia Lockwood’s poem, *Rape Joke*,<sup>32</sup> went ‘viral on social media and was covered in mainstream media’<sup>33</sup> after publication on the *The Awl*. Lanphier suggests that the poem ‘posits itself as a joke that responds to the social silencing of rape.’<sup>34</sup> Rape jokes were a particularly tendentious topic at the time, following comedian Daniel Tosh’s ‘gang rape gaffe’<sup>35</sup> in which he responded to a heckler with ‘Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by like, 5 guys right now?’<sup>36</sup>, stirring significant online discourses surrounding the question of whether rape jokes can be funny. Lockwood’s poem riffs on this concept, and was subsequently met with a variety of responses. One such response — ‘It was as if I was right there being raped with you. Except I wasn’t.’<sup>37</sup> — highlights the strength of this first-person account-cum-confession of rape in communicating the experience of rape and rape trauma.

Others echo misogyny, such as ‘oh, get over yourself, you attention whore. he was your boyfriend. you were drunk. he was drunk. that aint rape. you’re not a survivor, you’re not important and no one feels bad for you. you’re the rape joke.’”<sup>38</sup> This comment highlights the discourses which exist to silence those who have experienced rape. The poem is positioned within a context of internet discourses of a particular era, however many of the questions raised regarding how, if and when we should or can speak about rape remain pertinent.

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<sup>32</sup>Mark Bibbins, ‘Patricia Lockwood, “Rape Joke”’, *The Awl*, 25 July 2013, <<https://www.theawl.com/2013/07/patricia-lockwood-rape-joke/>> [accessed 13 May 2020].

<sup>33</sup>Lanphier.

<sup>34</sup>Lanphier, para. 2.

<sup>35</sup>Lara Cox, ‘Standing Up against the Rape Joke: Irony and Its Vicissitudes’, *Signs*, 40.4 (2015), 963-84, <[https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/stable/10.1086/680330?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/stable/10.1086/680330?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)> [accessed 3 October 2020], p. 971.

<sup>36</sup>Cox, p. 963.

<sup>37</sup>The Awl, ‘Responses to “Rape Joke”’, *The Awl*, <<https://www.theawl.com/2013/08/responses-to-rape-joke/>> [accessed 17 July, 2020]

<sup>38</sup>The Awl.

In choosing to speak out about rape, Lockwood received backlash, partly due to the timing. One comment is steeped in sarcasm:

Great job Patricia, you capitalized on some sort of twitter uproar over rape jokes by writing a bad poem called “The Rape Joke”, which details your experience with rape by your white trash BOYFRIEND and posting it on some crap website.

I now FINALLY understand why rape jokes aren’t funny!<sup>39</sup>

Another response, ‘Patricia Lockwood totally raped rape jokes’<sup>40</sup>, highlights the ways in which the poem itself can be misunderstood to endorse the colloquial use of “rape” as synonymous with “thrashed”, or “destroyed”, rather than as a reference to the act of rape itself. This comment lacks sensitivity to the subject matter in utilising the verb ‘rape’<sup>41</sup> in relation to Lockwood’s poetry.

While Goldner approves of Patricia Lockwood’s use of the rape joke, she notes ‘Rape jokes can oscillate somewhere between free speech and hate speech and between the domains of playing and reality, but in whatever register, we now know that their “no harm done” premise turns out to be false.’<sup>42</sup> In the above barrage of online vitriol directed at Lockwood for stepping towards the rape joke as a poetic device, victim-blaming attitudes in response to women’s disclosure are evident. This misogynistic rhetoric, and the rape joke itself (as opposed to jokes about rape jokes, or jokes where rape culture is the joke) are recontextualised by Lockwood and Vanessa Place for poetry.

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<sup>39</sup>The Awl.

<sup>40</sup>The Awl.

<sup>41</sup>The Awl.

<sup>42</sup>Goldner, p. 294.

## Vanessa Place: The Format of the Rape Joke in *You Had To Be*

### *There: Rape Jokes*

‘Rape is a nine letter word. There’s a silent woman at the end of it.’<sup>43</sup>

If you have to explain a joke, it’s not funny anymore. So, here we go: the punchline of the above joke is that raped women are silenced. Cue the laughter? Not so much.

In dismantling the format of rape jokes, often times removing the laughter, or humour, it is possible to see the underlying misogyny—a sort of self-identified example of rape culture personified—in their message as unlaughable due to their symbolic violence. ‘Rape is a nine letter word. There’s a silent woman at the end of it’<sup>44</sup> is not innately a misogynistic statement nor is it universally funny. When read as satire, the joke can be viewed as feminist in that it recognizes the gendered nature of sexual violence within a rape culture. It also acknowledges the ways in which women are silenced from speaking out following rape— thus reflecting the blame from the “victim” onto the perpetrator, therefore “punching up”.

Tone becomes important in delivery of rape jokes, or use of aspects of comedy such as satire, wit, or word play.

At an event held in January 2015, Vanessa Place performed rape jokes to a silent audience under the performance title *The Ontology of the Rape Joke*.<sup>45</sup> In footage<sup>46</sup> of this reading, Place’s delivery held the pause and emphasis appropriate to the delivery of jokes, though there is an underlying irony to the near deadpan tone, to the matter-of-fact recitation of rape joke after rape joke. While the core components are repurposed in mostly complete

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<sup>43</sup>Place, p. 74.

<sup>44</sup>Place, p. 74.

<sup>45</sup>Cabinet, Performance and Panel / “The Ontology of the Rape Joke,” with Vanessa Place, Jeff Dolven, Gayle Salamon, and Jamieson Webster, <[https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/events/dolven\\_place\\_salamon\\_webster.php](https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/events/dolven_place_salamon_webster.php)> [accessed 5 June 2020].

<sup>46</sup>Cabinet.

content across different forums, the focal text in this thesis is *You Had To Be There*.<sup>47</sup>

Another version is referred to in the introduction of *You Had To Be There*, and is called *I've got this really great joke about rape*.<sup>48</sup> This performance is described as a reading 'in which the artist recites rape jokes for 45 minutes to a seated audience in a gallery or from a small stage. It is art performance, not stand up comedy.'<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, Place describes the transcript-poem hybrid as:

A curated selection of rape jokes taken from various Anglophone websites devoted to crowd-sourced offensive humor. Individual jokes may have been slightly modified to emphasize their poetic features.<sup>50</sup>

Place's work allows scope to examine the ways in which rape jokes may enact symbolic violence. In this text, the near verbatim jokes offer opportunity for subversion of dominant discourse, the "rape script", cast with "rape myth".

Throughout the text, as the multitude of jokes are run together, one after the other (without line breaks, just a margin indentation as precursor to the set-up of the next rape joke, the next rape joke, the next rape joke). In many 'chunks' of the 138-page joke sequence, set ups or punchlines are linked by a keyword—oftentimes the signifier 'rape'—which creates a morphing flow of vitriol. When taken at face value it reads as hate speech, like anti-women propaganda. In reference to her live performances of the text's script, many reviewers and commentators discuss tensions between mirth and joy, complicity and refusal, to laugh or not to laugh, in the audience; with a tension of voice and silence between Place and the listeners.

Vanessa Place is *not* a comedian, rather her spoken or written delivery of rape jokes is a passage through which hegemonic discourses may travel. These rape jokes are recontextualised, as a kind of hybrid of found poetry. The primary intent of the rape joke is

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<sup>47</sup>Place.

<sup>48</sup>Place, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup>Place, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup>Place, 'Rape Jokes', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 18.4 (2017), n.p..

removed when printed in a poetry book. Place does not explicitly endorse the messages she delivers. Instead, she connects them into a flow of the jokes, which connect to one another through connotation, repetition and synonyms. Subverted rape jokes are paradoxical in the duality of their meaning—when read at face value, they may appear to endorse rape, rape jokes and rape culture, although when a feminist lens, or satiric tone is employed, they challenge discourses of power and submission.

Rhetorical questions are used by Place to draw attention to the significance of statistical inequities in the justice system, and is redolent of Fiona Benson's allusions to the Brock Turner trial.

Only 6% of all rape cases end in conviction. Anyone else like those odds?/ I like to watch rape trials. When the defendant is found not guilty, I follow the victim home and rape her. I mean, who's going to believe her?<sup>51</sup>

The use of the statistic '6%',<sup>52</sup> is interesting as it acknowledges the truth of under-reporting, and the conditions of the courtroom context that denies true justice for those who do report.

The formulation of this joke also implores the listener to act, to commit rape (or at the very least consider it). Through the use of persuasive devices, the line 'Anyone else like those odds?'<sup>53</sup> is a direct incitement of the receiver of the joke to implicitly endorse rape by remaining silent, or to speak up. In this context, as in many, silence is complicity. This also touches on a thematic thread, being the disbelief and silencing of women following a sexual assault, which segues into the proceeding joke. This is a theme which several of the jokes riff on. It also seemingly contradicts the latter generalised assertion that women lie, or that there is any prevalence of false accusations. The barrage of contradictory jokes in *You Had To Be There* mimics the relentless, paradoxical nature of misogynistic rape jokes which rely on the

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<sup>51</sup>Place, p. 102.

<sup>52</sup>Place, p. 102.

<sup>53</sup>Place, p. 102.

popular consent granted to dominant discourses. Throughout the collection of jokes, wordplay are used, specifically idiom and pun. All jokes-cum-stanzas rely on stereotypic understandings of western notions of cisheterosexuality.

Another thematic thread developed follows the ‘silent woman’ joke which opened this section. The silencing of those who experience rape carries a connotative “unspeakability” regarding rape disclosure. The silencing implied in the lack of lawful justice in rape cases, as outlined above in reference to the ‘6%’,<sup>54</sup> joke, recurs in the form of a more direct use of the word silence/silent.

Rape is a nine letter word. There’s a silent woman at the end of it./Silence is golden;  
duct tape is silver./ Duct tape + attempted rape = a running gag./ As you might  
expect my sex tape is duct.<sup>55</sup>

With silence as a linking idea, confidence in the probability of doubt and disbelief in the hypothetical situation of the ‘6%’,<sup>56</sup> rape joke becomes more sinister when paired with the abduction, restraint and force which follows. ‘Silence is golden’,<sup>57</sup> to a rapist, as it may be received as tacit endorsement (before, during or after the fact), and also enables the rapist to subsequently remain free from many consequences of their actions. Silence is also golden (as in ‘an implied first place’), as it is a form of control which does not require physical force, rather it is hegemonic within rape cultures. A key function of hegemony is popular consent, and when that fails, rule by force is the next best thing. Runners-up get silver. When read within the context of the other ‘duct rape’,<sup>58</sup> jokes, the ‘running gag’,<sup>59</sup> highlights the perpetuation of rape culture, while also inferring the fleeing of the victim. The fleeing image is also apparent in the mythology of Daphne, and the hare from Fiona Benson’s

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<sup>54</sup>Place, p. 102.

<sup>55</sup>Place, pp. 74-76.

<sup>56</sup>Place, p. 102.

<sup>57</sup>Place, p. 76.

<sup>58</sup>Place, p. 76.

<sup>59</sup>Place, p. 76.

[*transformation: Daphne*].<sup>60</sup> The present continuous ‘running’<sup>61</sup> indicates the ongoing nature of the damsel in distress type image of a fleeing woman. It can also be read as a lamentation for the losses in feminist efforts to outrun misogyny in discussing rape, consent, and women’s silences.

In ordering these four jokes, Place links the silence and the silencing to the perpetuation of sexual violence. The image of duct tape over a mouth is a symbolic connotation of the pun ‘my sex tape is duct,’<sup>62</sup> which also introduces the sinister element of recording sex without consent. The rape threat is implied in the double-meaning of ‘tape’<sup>63</sup> as a weapon of abduction and force. A taped mouth cannot speak, and emphasises the lack of verbal (or any) consent, at the same time that it refers to the recording of a sexual act, or revenge porn. The rape threat in the wordplay on ‘tape’<sup>64</sup> and ‘duct’<sup>65</sup> draws on language symbolic violence against, predominantly, women.

Imagery associated with a voice bound by force centres on passive, restrained, distressed, women. These women are treated as objects onto which men project their desires. They are objectified, and their powerlessness to speak, or have their “no” heard are eroticised. Ultimately, in framing the silence of rape victims as the punchline to a superiority of rapists in the set up highlights the ways in which rape can make women voiceless before, during, and after the fact. In these jokes, women are unable to speak on both a literal and metaphorical level.

In another return to the theme of silence, censorship and the erasure of women’s disclosures, testimonies, victim impact statements, Vanessa Place adjusts an idiomatic phrase

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<sup>60</sup>Benson, p. 31-32.

<sup>61</sup>Place, p. 76.

<sup>62</sup>Place, p. 76.

<sup>63</sup>Place, p. 76.

<sup>64</sup>Place, p. 76.

<sup>65</sup>Place, p. 76.



by replacing the phrase “tree falls” with ‘rape a woman’.<sup>66</sup> The joke extends the idea of silence as discussed, while conveying a stereotypical common sense tone which riffs on the idiomatic thought experiment: “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” This thought experiment navigates the subjective/objective dichotomy when it comes to notions of truth, reality and phenomenology. It begs questions of the in/certainty of the material. It poses the question; What is real? The joke reads, ‘If you rape a woman in the woods and no one hears it, does she have a case?’<sup>67</sup> This further emphasises notions of reality, truth, and the morally grey area of legal innocence for a large portion of perpetrators of sexual violence. The punchline seems to gloat in its flaunting of the clearly acknowledged injustice against those who experience rape.

The jokes in Place’s collection are synonymous to one another – they each echo the same framework of ideas, each sharing similar conceptual foundations. The ‘6%’,<sup>68</sup> joke/stanza connects strongly to the idiom-based ‘in the woods’,<sup>69</sup> joke/stanza. The question of ‘Who’s going to believe her?’<sup>70</sup> and ‘does she have a case?’<sup>71</sup> echo under-reporting and low rates of conviction in a world where the application of law in the justice system does not protect victims, nor punish perpetrators.

The oft innocuous pun is also used in a more insidious form—sexual double entendre, or sexual innuendo. This style of word play is utilised within the joke, ‘My wife was raped by a mime. He performed unspeakable acts’,<sup>72</sup> where the wordplay rests on a term closely related to silence—‘unspeakable’.<sup>73</sup> Here the word which seems to trigger the meaning of this joke which functions through incongruity and (an admittedly troubling) resolution as both

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<sup>66</sup>Place, p. 66.

<sup>67</sup>Place, p. 66.

<sup>68</sup>Place, p. 102.

<sup>69</sup>Place, p. 102.

<sup>70</sup>Place, p. 102.

<sup>71</sup>Place, p. 102.

<sup>72</sup>Place, p. 22.

<sup>73</sup>Place, p. 22.

applying to the innocuous silence of a mime, and the sinister silence of a ‘wife’<sup>74</sup> raped. The immense difficulty, if not impossibility, of speaking about rape (whether that is in disclosure, a police report, legal action, or through more individual pursuits such as in disclosure to friends or family, perhaps therapy or other spiritual, religious, creative pursuits, or any other self-help method.) Absence (as implied in the *un* prefix) is absolute, characterised as the complete lack of presence. This may indicate the inevitability of complete decimation of voice for those who experience sexual violence, through the duration of the event, and in wake of it.

Performance relies on imaginative interpretation, or “playing pretend.” In mime, pretence is amplified due to the invisibility of props and set—that is, the context under which the act takes place. Thus, the rape can be construed as not *really* happening, if conflated with the pretence of mime as performance. In the context of this rape joke, the notion of invisibility can be combined with the notion of silence—that is, women’s reports of sexual assault are disbelieved, invisibilised (or erased) and silenced. The recurring theme of silence is furthered here in the implied gender of the speaker delivering the joke, when it is assumed to refer to a heterosexual relationship. Here, the husband’s voice holds authority and is to be believed in contrast to the voice of the wife, which is not only silenced, but doubted. The punchline relies on the rape both taking place, and *not* taking place, in that it is part of an “act” in the fictional sense, rather than as synonymous with “action”.

The term ‘unspeakable acts’<sup>75</sup> implies either immoral or unethical behaviours, and the verb ‘performed’<sup>76</sup> holds the double meaning of a) stage performance such as mime, and b) a past tense (completed) action. In the latter meaning, (which is only fully understood after the reveal of the punchline) there is a sinister undertone which is amplified by connotations of

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<sup>74</sup>Place, p. 22.

<sup>75</sup>Place, p. 22.

<sup>76</sup>Place, p. 22.

deviance—particularly sexual—in regards to the ‘acts’<sup>77</sup> which were completed. The gravity of the phrase ‘unspeakable acts’<sup>78</sup> is one of disgust or repulsion, even when used carelessly as a euphemism for consensual sexual expression which has a moral stigma in the eyes of the sexually conservative. In both the conservative response, and the label being used to refer to acts of sexual violence, there are connotations of depravity. And to be subject to the depravity of another, is to be faced with the option to remain silent, and hold the hurt in, or speak out, and risk feeling the hurt anyway. This joke leans into notions of fear and terror regarding the experience of rape, and the subsequent media narratives which cast rape as a spectacle, seeking to titillate their audience.

In response to Place’s *You Had To Be There*,<sup>79</sup> Jamieson Webster applies a Freudian analysis to the structure, function and effect of the joke itself, drawing particularly on the grammar of fantasy. The grammar of fantasy is an interaction involving three parties: the joker, the listener, and the object of the joke, while the joke structure itself also involves three parties ‘the subject of the sexual or violent act, the person objectified and undergoing the act as body, and the witness.’<sup>80</sup> In discussing the particularities of the rape joke, Webster then states, ‘the rape joke does not simply speak a truth—the truth about rape, or rapists—its truth is oddly the truth of joking itself and the tragicomic vicissitudes of human sexuality.’<sup>81</sup>

Webster highlights the ways which classical tragedies such as *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and the mythology of *Oedipus* reveal an ‘unbearable truth.’<sup>82</sup> In these texts the unbearable truth is characteristically avoided in death, that is, it is ‘not lived with.’<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile comedy contrasts this death in response to unbearable truths and ‘shows us how we live with our

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<sup>77</sup>Place, p. 22.

<sup>78</sup>Place, p. 22.

<sup>79</sup>Place.

<sup>80</sup>Webster, p. 270.

<sup>81</sup>Webster, p. 269.

<sup>82</sup>Webster, p. 269.

<sup>83</sup>Webster, p. 269.

symptoms.<sup>84</sup> With this understanding of comedy the effectiveness of rape jokes as jokes becomes clear, in spite of the fact that they are, in Webster's words:

problematic, intolerable even. Reactionary, in the sense of what you cannot get outside of, what provokes you, and provokes in you the temptation to both identification and disidentification: horror, outrage, dismissal, secret identification, or its reverse, identification, omnipotent laughter, and split-off horror, disavowed vulnerability.<sup>85</sup>

Webster also defines jokes as inherently anti-authority, the humour exists in the fact that there is subversion, transgression or rebellion against a power structure, or figure of authority—whether that authority be a societal institution, or norms regarding censorship of speech, and the morality surrounding language use. She states,

The trouble with rape jokes is that in undermining one authority (and most often it is the authority of women), another authority is asserted in its place, namely, the vindication of the perpetrator of sexual assault. The question one must ask is whether there is a rape joke that simply undoes the authority of the rapist. Perhaps this is where the subversion of the joke is context dependent.<sup>86</sup>

I suggest with the additional textual layer of poetic performance, on the page or stage, the rape joke appropriated can create a context where the subversion is of the authority of the rapist, or the authority of discourses of rape culture, creating opportunity to share the experience of rape and rape trauma, through the grammar of fantasy, and satire. While Vanessa Place effectively uses a tone which removes the personal, Patricia Lockwood's poem, *Rape Joke*,<sup>87</sup> is painfully autobiographical.

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<sup>84</sup> Webster, p. 269.

<sup>85</sup> Webster, p. 272.

<sup>86</sup> Webster, pp. 271-272.

<sup>87</sup> Lockwood.

## Patricia Lockwood: Laughing at the Rape Joke in *Rape Joke*

*Rape Joke*<sup>88</sup> is structured as a series of single line, or multi line stanzas without breaks—the sentences are strung from margin to margin, and feature heavy use of repetition and parallel construction. There is a use of humour in the wry, self-deprecating tone of the confessional piece. There is a conversationalist tone in the use of aphorism, and elements of recount in the report meets rant meets ironic comedy set poem. Ultimately, the poem gives rise to, and holds, feelings of anger, exhaustion, disbelief, hatred, self-hatred, irony and vindication.

In writing on Patricia Lockwood's *Rape Joke*<sup>89</sup>, Virginia Goldner frames rape jokes as having a false premise of 'no harm done',<sup>90</sup> however, she does praise Patricia Lockwood's *Rape Joke*<sup>91</sup> as having found 'just the right voice (weary and stinging) to "speak the bitterness" necessary to both render—and work—the oftentimes unending trauma of rape.'<sup>92</sup>

*Rape Joke*<sup>93</sup> is a poem that subverts the symbolic violence of rape jokes by utilising the concept and messaging (rather than the format) of the rape joke. In its tone, Lockwood's *Rape Joke*<sup>94</sup> functions in a similar way to that of Heather Ross's stand up joke which takes rape culture, and dominant discourses surrounding assault, disbelief of women, and silence as its ultimate source of critique.

In 'The Internet as Spectator Disclosure: Consent, Community, and Responsibility in Patricia Lockwood's Viral Poem "Rape Joke"',<sup>95</sup> Elizabeth Lanphier discusses rape jokes, and their potential to be both funny and unfunny, dependent on context, claiming 'it is possible to use the phenomenon of the rape joke to comment on the phenomenon itself—and at the same

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<sup>88</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>89</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>90</sup>Goldner, p. 294.

<sup>91</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>92</sup>Goldner, p. 297.

<sup>93</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>94</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>95</sup>Lanphier.

time to be genuinely funny.’<sup>96</sup> Lanphier It is with this acceptance that a joke which makes the phenomenon of the rape joke the target, the butt, the victim of the punchline, that an exploration of the tone of Lockwood’s poem does possess humour in its dealings with a difficult topic, and can, indeed, be funny.

Lanphier attributes the appeal and effect of *Rape Joke*<sup>97</sup> being due to shared understanding based on cultural context, ‘Lockwood draws her reader in as part of a shared culture, and because we participate in that culture, we get her jokes.’<sup>98</sup> The voice of the piece asks the reader to entertain the perspectives of the person objectified and undergoing the act as body, and the witness, while the subject of the sexual or violent act remains voiceless, and is removed as a participant in the narrative of the poem. Lanphier continues, ‘And because we get her jokes, we participate in the culture’<sup>99</sup> introducing the element of the subject of the sexual or violent act, identified as a third of the participants in a rape joke, as identified by Webster in line with Freud’s grammar of fantasy. Lanphier concludes that this, ‘makes Lockwood’s use of the rape joke—and the fact we get it—at once clever and disconcerting.’<sup>100</sup> Lanphier At the same time, the first person ‘you’<sup>101</sup> (where the narrative voice addresses herself in second person) simultaneously functions on a second person level, positioning the reader, again, as a witness who is melded with the object of the assault.

At some points, the rape joke of Lockwood’s poem is the rapist personified, and at others it is the circumstance of writing rape trauma. The personification of the rape joke occurs for the first time in the third line of the poem, ‘The rape joke it wore a goatee. A goatee.’<sup>102</sup>

The reader is encouraged to laugh at the rapist himself as the repetition works to

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<sup>96</sup>Lanphier, para. 12.

<sup>97</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>98</sup>Lanphier, para. 20.

<sup>99</sup>Lanphier, para. 20.

<sup>100</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>101</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>102</sup>Lockwood.

ridicule the rape-joke-character. This is extended through the hypothetical situation presented in Lockwood's imperative tone with the instructional verb 'imagine'.<sup>103</sup> Lockwood's instructs the reader to 'imagine the rape joke looking in the mirror...grooming itself to look more like a rape joke.'<sup>104</sup> Here, the double meaning of 'grooming',<sup>105</sup> is particularly ominous as the lines which follow outline the age difference between Lockwood and 'the rape joke'.<sup>106</sup> It is also emphasised that the rape-joke-character was a student of the narrator's father, someone she had known 'for years, since [she was] too young to be interesting to him.'<sup>107</sup>

In regards to laughing at the rapist, turning the perpetrator into a "joke", Lanphier agrees that the rape-joke-character represents the authoritative rape culture discourse, stating

The rapist is the rape joke insofar as he is identified as the problem itself, as the responsible agent for the sexual assault. This move is also a form of epistemic resistance: The speaker resists the power of her rapist by turning him into a joke.<sup>108</sup>

This displacement of power from the perpetrator to the ostensible victim places the rape-joke-character, and all that he represents as the authority against which the subversion is made, thus inverting the subject/object relationship within the grammar of fantasy.

When the rape joke of the poem is the circumstance of writing rape trauma, it is emphasised through repetition of the phrase 'the rape joke is that...'<sup>109</sup> which is implemented in the parallel construction of the first lines. Throughout, the rape joke is a metaphor which precedes confession. The conjunction 'that',<sup>110</sup> joins the notion of bitter irony, or wry aphorism with the subsequent independent clause which is structured in one of the following ways:

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<sup>103</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>104</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>105</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>106</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>107</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>108</sup>Lanphier, para. 8.

<sup>109</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>110</sup>Lockwood.

*“The rape joke is that [insert: autobiographical information]”*

*“The rape joke is that [insert: concrete details of the relationship surrounding the rape]”*

*“The rape joke is that [insert: recount of the rape event itself]”*

*“The rape joke is that [insert: description of resulting trauma]”*

*“The rape joke is that [insert: description of subsequent disclosure through poetry.]”*

Some of the lines place the comparison as between the rape joke, and that either ‘he’<sup>111</sup> (the perpetrator), or ‘you’<sup>112</sup> (the narrative voice) were the active subject in the independent clause which acts as the means of communicating any or all of the above points, which build to create meaning in the disclosure of rape and rape trauma.

In the back and forth between the he/you subject of the sentence construction is the push and pull of blame, the back and forth attempt to balance the idea of who is the active agent, the subject of the event, and who is the object upon which the act was performed. These ambiguities created through first person perspective via the second person pronoun ‘you’<sup>113</sup> seem to push the blame outwards, towards the witness, the wider cultural context in which we understand the rape joke of the poem. This draws on notions of blame and self blame as explored in relation to Alfred Fournier’s defence of the perpetrator as victim in disclosure, which are authoritative discourses on the “truth” of a woman as object to a sexual assault, subjected to both trauma, and disbelief and silencing. Due to this, there is ambiguity in who is being ridiculed by the joke as Lockwood employs self-deprecation.

The tongue-in-cheek tone of Lockwood’s use of the rape joke acts to turn herself into the butt of her own joke. ‘The rape joke is that you had been drinking wine coolers. Wine

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<sup>111</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>112</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>113</sup> Lockwood.



coolers! Who drinks wine coolers? People who get raped, according to the rape joke.’<sup>114</sup> While she pokes fun at her drink of choice, she is the butt of the joke, which riffs on the idea that there is a causative link between the actions of a victim, and the response of the perpetrator in cases of rape. This echoes a societal attitude of victim blaming which connects women’s behaviours (drinking wine coolers), to the presumed invitation of sexual assault, in this case, her derision towards wine coolers is linked with her victimisation during the event which followed the consumption of this beverage. Here Lockwood makes fun of herself for her drink choice in laughing at rape culture. It is a laugh of disbelief, in both the beverage choice, and the sexual violence which subsequently took place at the hands of her then boyfriend. Throughout the poem there is an underlying tone of disbelief, and irony.

#### Gendered Perspective & Point of View

The idea of “inviting” sexual assault is an aspect of victim blaming which looks to place the fault squarely on the victim, who in this case is a woman, for behaviour deemed immoral, or otherwise transgressive of the actions approved of for her gender, such as drinking “like a man”. In an attempt to speak out, to voice the trauma and question the event, nearing the end of the poem, Lockwood confronts the perpetrator, asking why he did it: ‘The rape joke is he said he didn’t know, like what else would a rape joke say? The rape joke said YOU were the one who was drunk.’<sup>115</sup> In the capitalisation of ‘YOU’,<sup>116</sup> emphasis is added to the blame placed upon Lockwood as narrator of this poem, which reflects the experience of victim blaming in her interactions with the perpetrator following the event, and as evidenced in her own self-conception in the earlier question of ‘Who drinks wine coolers? People who get

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<sup>114</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>115</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>116</sup>Lockwood.

raped'<sup>117</sup> there is a conflation of her actions, and his as 'consequence' to her choice, regardless of the illegality of his actions.

On the topic of her own experience with sexual assault, Patricia Lockwood discloses in a 2021 interview with Hadley Freeman of *The Guardian* that *Rape Joke*<sup>118</sup> is autobiographical, and was a departure from her prior work.

My work up to that point was so non-autobiographical... So maybe if you keep the autobiographical dammed up for so long, it emerges in something like 'Rape Joke',<sup>119</sup>

The notion of invitation of sexual assault is further explored as in the line, 'The rape joke is if you write a poem called Rape Joke, you're asking for it to become the only thing people remember about you.'<sup>120</sup> The phrasing of 'asking for it',<sup>121</sup> reflects the parlance of victim blaming in the wider world. This line is in some ways prophetic, as *Rape Joke*<sup>122</sup> was such a well-known poem—and Lockwood has been the first association for many I have encountered when discussing the topic of this thesis (that being poems about rape). However, Lockwood's *Priestdaddy*<sup>123</sup> was also well received and is a significant part of her identity as a published writer. The 2021 interview focuses on her newest book, *No One Is Talking About This*, and Lockwood discusses the vulnerability in being publicly known to have written an autobiographical rape poem. She states

Still now I'll be caught off guard if I'm being introduced somewhere for a reading and the very first thing they say about me is that I wrote "Rape Joke", and I'm supposed to

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<sup>117</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>118</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>119</sup> Hadley Freeman, 'Patricia Lockwood: "That's what's so attractive about the internet: you can exist there as a spirit in the void"', *The Guardian*, 30 January 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jan/30/patricia-lockwood-thats-whats-so-attractive-about-the-internet-you-can-exist-there-as-a-spirit-in-the-void>> [accessed 15 April 2021].

<sup>120</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>121</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>122</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>123</sup> Patricia Lockwood, *Priestdaddy* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017).

get up there and make a funny joke. I'll sometimes go completely quiet and you can see I'm experiencing something traumatic in real time.<sup>124</sup>

A false invitation is twisted on itself, when the character of the rape joke turns the blame on the 'YOU',<sup>125</sup> of the poem, the victim blaming merges with notions of disbelief as evident in the above close reading of Place's *You Had To Be There*.<sup>126</sup> Lanphier states, 'Since the rapist cannot account for his actions, he displaces blame on his victim.' The continued victim blaming parlance seems to draw on the logic of Freud's seduction theory, where a disclosure of sexual assault is evidence of the mental fragility and/or neuroses of women's minds, that self-reporting, or victims speaking up. In the case of *Rape Joke*,<sup>127</sup> Lockwood as narrator confronts and questions the perpetrator only to be accused of false accusation in that, 'the rape joke said you remembered it wrong, which made you laugh out loud for one long split-open second.'<sup>128</sup>

In discussions of rape culture, a theme is the silencing of women. This is illustrated in Lockwood's quote above, and within Vanessa Place's rape jokes, particularly in the line 'who's going to believe her?',<sup>129</sup> The rape-joke-character turning the blame, fault, accusation onto Lockwood as narrator seems to function through incongruity to cause laughter, much as a non-sequiter would. The claim that she has remembered it wrong is so incongruous in its gaslighting and denial of her lived experience, that an involuntary laugh is forced upon, or "made" to happen to the poem's narrator.

The laugh response is similar to that of the poem's narrator when Lockwood returns to laughter as a response to a rape event (and the story of the rape event). At the very least, the laughter is directed at the titular rape-joke-character.

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<sup>124</sup>Freeman.

<sup>125</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>126</sup>Place.

<sup>127</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>128</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>129</sup>Place.

The rape joke is you went home like nothing happened, and laughed about it the next day and the day after that, and when you told people you laughed, and that was the rape joke.<sup>130</sup>

Much like Cosby minimised the accusations of events of sexual assault as “a joke,” here Lockwood portrays the minimisation and trivialisation of her own experiences while internalising the blame as “a joke.” In these contexts, referring to the situation as “a joke” is a method of distancing oneself from the circumstances, and dismissing speaking of the event as farcical, absurd and untrue.

### The Significance of Colloquial Language

The poem features conversational interjections, which create a sense of familiarity between narrative voice and reader. ‘No offense’<sup>131</sup> is particularly interesting as it explores the idea of intention and reception in communication, and is a common refrain in jokes deemed inappropriate, or offensive. Oftentimes these kinds of jokes are politically incorrect, rude, or objectively judgemental in content, and the disclaimer “no offense” acts to mitigate any negative reaction of the listener, who is oftentimes the target of such language use.

In the context of *Rape Joke*,<sup>132</sup> the disclaimer follows a dismissive and judgemental description of the facial features of the rapist, which maligns his facial hair.

Imagine the rape joke looking in the mirror, perfectly reflecting back itself, and grooming itself to look more like a rape joke. “Ahhhh,” it thinks. “Yes. *A goatee*.”

No offence.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>131</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>132</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>133</sup> Lockwood.

The paragraph break adds pause to the flow of the joke, creating comic timing in the delivery. ‘No offence.’<sup>134</sup> is steeped in irony—it is tone policing of the self in the place of self-censorship in the first place. It is a deliberate construction in terms of sequencing which serves to undermine the narrative voice’s integrity from the outset, and cast the narrator as exceptionally self-aware. Likewise, it serves to intensify the sincere derision of the rape-joke-character via the symbol of his goatee. Oftentimes the phrase “no offense” is utilised to nullify or invalidate the impact of the offense, rather than reduce the offensive nature of the preceding comments themselves regardless of how distasteful, socially inappropriate, or otherwise insulting they are. Read in the latter sense, there is a sheen of sarcasm with the seeming intention of the poem to call out the rape-joke-character in mind, which is complicated by the notions of blame which Lockwood explores.

Another conversational interjection is an idiomatic phrase: ‘it gets funnier.’<sup>135</sup> This light-hearted expression normally serves to engage an audience, to intensify the feelings of shared humour in telling a joke or anecdote amongst friends. Oftentimes it is used sarcastically to emphasise unpleasant, but ultimately harmful day-to-day experiences, to remark upon the Murphy’s Law-type qualities of an inconvenience. The throw away comment becomes sinister within the context of *Rape Joke*.<sup>136</sup> Lockwood derides the rape-joke through superficial and disturbing concerns. The more superficial criticisms of the rape-joke character include that his date nights included watching wrestling at his best friend Peewee’s house, that he loved The Rock, that he had poor taste in fiction. Lockwood’s tone conveys distaste. The disturbing thought that perhaps he kept a diary in which ‘I wonder if he wrote about the rape in it’<sup>137</sup> conveys disgust.

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<sup>134</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>135</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>136</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>137</sup>Lockwood.

Aside from the past participle ‘raped’<sup>138</sup> which occurs in the wine cooler stanza, ‘I wonder if he wrote about the rape in it.’<sup>139</sup> is the only instance in the poem which directly labels the rape event that the poem is about. Interestingly it is the only instance of the first-person pronoun ‘I’,<sup>140</sup> and it is in this line that any ambiguity in the lived experience of the narrator (representative of Lockwood herself) disappears. Despite the push-and-pull and back-and-forth regarding blame (particularly in the wine cooler section), here the word ‘rape’<sup>141</sup> is used explicitly, without any sense of remove provided by framing the event as a rape joke with sarcasm or sincerity. Amongst the relative remove of the third person ‘he’,<sup>142</sup> and the second person ‘you’,<sup>143</sup> which refers not to the reader directly, but the narrative voice, the proximity of the first-person pronoun to the thought (‘wonder’)<sup>144</sup> demonstrates the imbalance in labelling it as rape, or the urge to record the event. The reader is placed in a position of taking the thought on themselves, the verb ‘wonder’<sup>145</sup> acting as an imperative command to consider whether the incident held the same gravity for the rape-joke-character to become noteworthy, as it did for the poet. In this way, connection between the reader and narrator are created, aligning the interpretation with that of the writer’s disclosure: it was rape.

### Is Laughter Medicine?

Lockwood does not provide an answer to the question of whether it is okay to laugh at a rape joke. She embraces the uncertainty of whether or not trauma can be the stuff of comedy, ‘Can rape jokes be funny at all, is the question.’<sup>146</sup> This line near the end of the poem contrasts

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<sup>138</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>139</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>140</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>141</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>142</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>143</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>144</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>145</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>146</sup>Lockwood.

with the conversational, near flippant tone of voice achieved through interjection and colloquialisms throughout the piece. The concept of the punchline is alluded to in the line that follows: ‘Can any part of the rape joke be funny. The part where it ends—haha, just kidding!’<sup>147</sup>

Without a question mark, Lockwood is not so much posing the question herself, rather drawing attention to the question, and suggesting that the fact that it ends, the fact that it is not “real”, but a joke. It satirises the notion that a person delivering a misogynist rape joke is “just kidding” so it must not be harmful. This is not the case in *Rape Joke*,<sup>148</sup> as despite the sardonic undertones, the piece which satirises and ridicules the rape-joke-character is not, in fact, kidding.

The reality of the event and materiality of the impact it has had on the narrator/Lockwood is emphasised in the line ‘The rape joke is that this is just how it happened.’<sup>149</sup> The use of the word ‘just’<sup>150</sup> gestures towards notions of fact without adhering to any expectation of a linear account with specific details. It also illustrates that the preceding images are the experience, and without an audience that can understand that the experience of rape and the subsequent trauma evades a coherent narrative structure. However, as Cixous may suggest, Lockwood labels her trauma experience as something that ‘cries out for the right to be told.’<sup>151</sup>

While Lockwood recounts that she ‘laughed about it the next day and the day after that, and when [she] told people [she] laughed’,<sup>152</sup> there is an implication in the inclusion of the question of whether or not a rape joke should be laughed at, that her lived experience is of laughter in response to rape itself. The idiomatic phrase “laugh so you don’t cry” phrase is

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<sup>147</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>148</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>149</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>150</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>151</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>152</sup> Lockwood.

inferred, alongside the notion that either the rape-joke-character, or the narrator/Lockwood are laughable, are to be mocked or ridiculed. Perhaps the goatee is to be mocked rightly, whether a kind act or not, while the victim of sexual assault is to be disbelieved, cast as “kidding”, or fantasising, of making it up. Lockwood seems to riff on the idea that it must be a joke, as it is not the stuff of a “real” rape—it doesn’t follow the mythology of the predatory stranger, rather it is a bad choice in a lame boyfriend to be ridiculed. The ridicule follows, as Lockwood derides the music taste of the personified rape joke, before closing on the lines: ‘Come on, that’s a little bit funny’<sup>153</sup> and challenges the reader to laugh with ‘Admit it.’<sup>154</sup> This closing line answers the question, can a rape joke be funny? It suggests that if the punchline is the perpetrator, then it is laughable and should give rise to humour.

Simultaneously, the titular rape joke ends for the reader, but there is no “just kidding” which creates a sense of disquiet and unease. The answer to the question is complicated, nuanced, and more confusingly uncertain than before, especially in the imperative goading to concede that at the very least the rape-joke-character (or this absurd representation of him) is indeed funny—even if only a little bit.

The ridicule of the rape-joke-character is intended to be humorous, and can potentially illicit comic relief at some point throughout the emotionally difficult poem. In detailing an unbearable truth, the question of whether or not this means that rape jokes in and of themselves are funny, or can or should be laughed at is ambiguous. This ambiguity is described by Lanphier as symptomatic of the liminality of the poem:

“Rape Joke” is replete with liminal imagery and comprised of ambiguities. Shifting meanings cannot be fixedly defined—which is part of what poetry can do: trouble rigid interpretation and definitions. The instances of ambiguity are not limited to the

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<sup>153</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>154</sup> Lockwood.



language or literary devices of the poem but extend to the scenes described between consensual and coerced sex, responsibility, and speaking about rape.<sup>155</sup>

#### Imagery Inside the Trauma Flashback

The theme of silence which was predominant in Vanessa Place's *You Had To Be There*, and in societal discourses surrounding rape and trauma, is evident in Lockwood's *Rape Joke*<sup>156</sup> alongside the notion of speaking trauma in the content, structure, style and message of the poem itself. Both *The Wounded Deer*,<sup>157</sup> by Pascale Petit, and *Vertigo & Ghost*,<sup>158</sup> by Fiona Benson use imagery in order to convey the difficulties of communicating the trauma experience given the ruptures in time created by the flashback experience. Patricia Lockwood records this experience through sentences which span from left margin to right, creating a flow which begins with simple sentences, ramping up to a metatextual reference to the disclosure of the titular rape in *Rape Joke*.<sup>159</sup>

The rape joke is that you were facedown. The rape joke is that you were wearing a pretty green necklace that your sister made for you. Later you cut that necklace up. The mattress felt a specific way, and your mouth felt a specific way open against it, as if you were speaking but you know you were not. As if your mouth were open ten years into the future, reciting a poem called Rape Joke.<sup>160</sup>

This section jumps from the detail of the mattress in one sentence, to the image of the pretty green necklace, with connotations of sentimentality in the object's status as a gift from a family member. In the next sentence there is a temporal jump to the aftermath of the event being recounted. The linearity of the narrative is disrupted by the disjointed, fragmentary

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<sup>155</sup> Lanphier, para. 4.

<sup>156</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>157</sup> Petit.

<sup>158</sup> Benson.

<sup>159</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>160</sup> Lockwood.

nature of the narrator's recall, symptomatic of the trauma inflicted by the rape. The destruction of the necklace indicates its infusion with the memory, and its presence on the page amongst the concrete detail of the mattress in the following sentence.

There is an ambiguity to the use of the word 'specific',<sup>161</sup> in that it is entirely nonspecific in the abstract quality of the adjective, while its meaning is synonymous with particular, distinct, precise and certain. In the memory of the poet, the feeling was specific, but on the page it evades the concrete, the sensory. Lockwood leans on the figurative, using the simile phrase 'as if'<sup>162</sup> to draw attention to the hypothetical nature of her ability to speak at the moment in which the rape occurred—'but you know you were not.'<sup>163</sup>

Lanphier describes the disjunctive timeline of the narrative, which lacks linearity, with events out of consecutive sequence as 'Lockwood mov[ing] between the speaker's present views of the past, her beliefs at the time of her assault, and her mental and emotional state in the years intervening.'<sup>164</sup> Following the mattress simile, Lockwood runs directly into the next thought, jumping in media res to the aftermath again, where the theme of silence speaks volumes, elucidating the confessionalism of the poem: 'As if your mouth were open ten years into the future, reciting a poem called Rape Joke.'<sup>165</sup> This line links the trauma event to the act of retelling the event, it juxtaposes the silence of the moment with the speech of the present moment of the poem. While this link between the open mouth against the mattress with the open mouth which recites presents a transition from silence to speech, it also holds as conflation between the then and the now, in which the pain of the silent scream endures.

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<sup>161</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>162</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>163</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>164</sup> Lanphier, para. 6.

<sup>165</sup> Lockwood.

In Lockwood's words, 'The rape joke cries out to be told',<sup>166</sup> speaking to the persistence with which the experience of rape trauma demands to be disclosed, even in as an adapted, mutated form such as a joke or a poem rather than a sanctioned avenue such as a police report or courtroom cross-examination. This line follows a reference to vengeance, to a fantasy—not in the form of a neurotic imagining of the “alleged” assault, but in the form of a ‘dream of killing the rape joke for years, spilling all of its blood out, telling it that way.’<sup>167</sup> The fantasy here is not that it happened in the first place, but what the victim wishes she could do to the rape joke, as a stand in for the rape-joke-character with the goatee—the rapist himself.

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<sup>166</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>167</sup>Lockwood.

## Conclusion

*'By writing herself, woman will return to the body – which has been more than confiscated from her.'*<sup>1</sup>

– *'The Laugh of the Medusa'*, Hélène Cixous

Pascale Petit, Fiona Benson, Vanessa Place and Patricia Lockwood inscribe the traumatic experience. While Petit, Benson and Lockwood each create poetry which embodies sexualised trauma, Place instead creates a voice grounded in the social body. Benson and Lockwood foreground the experience of rape, and refer to their own trauma (at least inferentially). In terms of the wound imagery, in *Vertigo & Ghost*<sup>2</sup> and *Rape Joke*,<sup>3</sup> the traumas blister – there is a thin layer of translucent skin between the poet's personal body of experience, and the audience's gaze. In *The Wounded Deer*,<sup>4</sup> Petit refracts her ambiguous experience through symbols drawn from Frida Kahlo's art and biography. As discussed in Chapter One, Petit's poetic use of the wound, when informed by her interview statements regarding her own writing process, can be read as representative of Petit's own bodily trauma. In growing a proverbial "thicker skin," the poet creates space between the site of trauma (the person, the body), and the audience. In guarding their autobiography from the audience, the trauma is held much closer to the body, away from the page. The remove which analogy offers here does not preclude the possibility of the poet activating the imagery of gore – for instance, in Petit's use of detail from Kahlo's tram accident. Each poet expresses a component of the experience of trauma, whether at a micro or macro societal level.

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<sup>1</sup> Cixous, p. 880.

<sup>2</sup> Benson.

<sup>3</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>4</sup> Petit.

The ability of poetry, particularly free verse poetry, to enable expression and portrayal — inscription — of rape trauma is partly due to its structure complementing the patterns within traumatised brains in which communication and time perception shuts down, only for emotion and image centres to become highly alert. In disrupting demands for narrative linearity or a sequence of events, let alone one organised with any coherence as demanded in discourses of justice, free verse allows the traumatised body a scaffold on which to cling whilst creating meaning, albeit in abstract, imagistic and emotional ways rather than objective, sequential or rational ones. In addition, the ability of poetry to act as vehicle for the experience of rape trauma comes partly due to its figurative qualities and symbolic and metaphorical use of language and ideas. While at a structural level, poetry activates the potential of portrayal, it is at an ideas, language and affect level where free verse poetry can simulate the experience of a flashback, embodying the experience of trauma for a reader or listener— fragmenting time and replicating for the reader the trauma experience. Poetry is full of possibilities in speaking trauma, for, according to Cixous, we must ‘inscribe the breath of the whole woman.’<sup>5</sup> In doing so, she will ‘forge for herself the antilogos weapon.’<sup>6</sup>

As evident in the score of literature across the social and medical sciences, there is a body of knowledge which speaks to the physiological impact of trauma in an ongoing way. The phenomenological experience of trauma (the event as perceived by the subject, inextricable from the ongoing impact) can be conveyed as wholly through poetic language as other ideas can be through other registers. The ways in which Petit, Benson and Lockwood speak embodied trauma centre on the role of imagery to convey the connectedness of mind and body. The imagery ranges from the concrete, to the metaphorical, allegorical and symbolic, creating an oscillation between ideas of real and not real. *You Had To Be There*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cixous, p. 880.

<sup>6</sup> Cixous, p. 880.

<sup>7</sup> Place.

creates a similar effect where two contrasting things are true at the same time, evoked particularly through wordplay such as double entendre, and the format of the rape joke. Lockwood likewise equips her imagery with tension through the grammar of fantasy. *The Wounded Deer*,<sup>8</sup> *Vertigo & Ghost*,<sup>9</sup> *You Had To Be There*,<sup>10</sup> and *Rape Joke*,<sup>11</sup> all discuss rape, trauma or the sexualised wounded woman, and draw on mythological or sociological ideas of rape.

In the four key texts discussed, repetition is a commonly used strategy in conveying the pervasive nature of trauma in the mind body and world of the trauma endurer. The word choices across these collections are heavy with connotation, each text pared back to its main message. Repetition occurs in instances of words, such as “rape”. Repetition occurs in the inclusion of characters, such as Zeus, or the personified Rape Joke. Repetition occurs in images, poet specific, and more generally as the wound. Repetition occurs in portrayals of time in a conceptual sense where there is a chronological return to the event of trauma in the poem itself. This return is representative of the nature of trauma, and its ongoing impact. Time is an aspect which is discussed as fragmented, disrupted, perhaps disorderly, in both neuroscientific and literary discussions and/or depictions of the traumatised brain and body.

*You Had To Be There*<sup>12</sup> differs from the other poetry in that there is not the experience of rape or any form of trauma in the narrative voice. In the barrage of jokes there is no ‘self’, no apparent bias, however the connotative realm of meanings is immediately unsettling. *You Had To Be There*<sup>13</sup> is very much a testimony of dominant discourses, particularly that of popular culture. It is in dominant discourses of rape that damaging stereotypes are created, and there is an absence of portrayals of the experience of trauma as a result of rape. Due to

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<sup>8</sup> Petit.

<sup>9</sup> Benson.

<sup>10</sup> Place.

<sup>11</sup> Lockwood.

<sup>12</sup> Place.

<sup>13</sup> Place.

the structural options in free verse form, poetry is particularly useful in providing a platform and tools with which to inscribe (and possibly replicate on the page) the experience of rape trauma which sits outside of the narrative constraints of other writing styles.

The wound is a central motif in trauma studies, and the metaphorical language trans navigates medical and artistic fields. In this thesis, the wound metaphor has been extended to the blister and callous labels for methods of disclosing (or not) personal trauma.

Confessionalism has been of central concern for the poets as evidenced in their own words, in interviews, for example. The degree to which each poet exposes herself as subject to rape trauma varies from the callous tone of Place's written and verbal delivery, to Lockwood, who pops the blister and prods at bruises. Primarily, Place's work occupies the semantic field of the wound in the joke barrage structure. Although the jokes do not all use the wound image itself, instead they demonstrate the symbolic violence of misogynistic language.

Voice, and speaking bodily trauma, is a consistent thread in the poetry examined above. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*,<sup>14</sup> Hélène Cixous advocates for the 'vulcanised and screaming',<sup>15</sup> voice of *Vertigo & Ghost*.<sup>16</sup> In their use of satire, the poets transgress comedy convention by the co-opting of the rape joke format. In doing so, they capture the cultural phenomenon of living as a rape victim in a rape culture where shock comedy is saturated with rape humour.

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond, the ultimate reverse-discourse, including the one

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<sup>14</sup>Cixous.

<sup>15</sup>Benson, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup>Benson.

that laughs at the very idea of “silence,” the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word “impossible” and writes it as “the end.”<sup>17</sup>

Laughter in the face of silence is heavily evident in Patricia Lockwood’s *Rape Joke*,<sup>18</sup> and in each text, silencing is refused.

What follows this critical analysis is poetry which seeks, like Petit, Benson and Lockwood’s, to inscribe moments of trauma on the page. The direct tone of Place’s poetry appears in these poems as the voice of a patriarchal society which idolises Zeus-like figures who abuse their power, and assault women. The voice has been capitalised for much the same reasons that the voice of Zeus in *Vertigo & Ghost*<sup>19</sup> is – to indicate the ways in which these masculine figures and misogynistic discourses figuratively take up social and emotional space. Patricia Lockwood’s *Rape Joke*<sup>20</sup> was integral to my development as a young poet, and I felt a fascinating intrigue which I could not quite place. The brutality of Lockwood’s confessional voice — interspersed with clever social commentary — stood out because of the subject matter, and strengthened my conviction in my own attempts to write from a raped body. It was the feeling of resonance and affinity. Lockwood neither shied away from the traumatic event as experienced in the wake of rape, nor languished in portrayals of forlorn raped women similar to those I had encountered in film and television. I had watched every slam poem on rape I could find, and while this impactful form of poetry is a valid subject of another thesis entirely, it utilises vastly different strategies than free verse poetry in print.

This poetry has been many years in the making, and has been driven by an urge to be heard, a need to tell the story. In 2014 I sat in a lecture theatre for Voice & Image in A semester and began trying to find the words. Then, in B Semester, I took the Creative Nonfiction paper and the story of the event inevitably bubbled up. When I returned to

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<sup>17</sup>Cixous, p. 886.

<sup>18</sup>Lockwood.

<sup>19</sup>Benson.

<sup>20</sup>Lockwood.



postgraduate study in 2019, I took Writing for Publication, and Writing and Embodiment and began to truly understand the connection between body and mind in writing. Writing is an *act*, a movement, a shifting of thought into form. I learnt to consider writing to be both bodily and active, and an act of labour. It is instinctive *and* deliberate.

I conclude that in writing poetry on the experience of trauma, personal detail is not the point. The specificities of the event of trauma are inextricably linked with the experience of trauma, but they are encoded in ways which are not conventional or grammatical. In the poetry above, and below, it is not the incident of trauma in which I am interested. There is already a breadth of depictions of traumatic events across literature, but little focus on the emotional interior for women following sexual assault. I have post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of sexual trauma, so much of my understanding of van der Kolk's writing was felt deeply. The specific event which caused my trauma is not in *& therefore bodies*. What is in it is an ongoing dialogue with a world that infuriates and frightens me. In *& therefore bodies*, I write trauma experience through flashback-like fragments, disruptions to time via tense, and an instability of self shown through inconsistent perspective indicative pronouns.

Enjambment is used to shatter ideas throughout, particularly in order to play on double meanings, and is exaggerated with syntactical errors and drifting text alignment. The intention here is to demonstrate the shattering of belief systems in the experience of a traumatic event whereby the limbic system is overwhelmed, and synapses shift shape.

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**& therefore bodies**

## Work in progress

The page is a mirror  
so take a closer look.

See her lean  
against the window sill,  
rest her chin on her palm  
tilt her head  
to one side, look up at you.

Remember the nights  
you did the same  
under the starry sky. Smoke a spliff  
see the orange end burn in the dark. Watch the arc  
of the butt  
tossed from the  
window hear it hiss  
on the grass.

Look closer, at her crush, on the window  
seat, next to her. Hear the  
laugh of the girl with the messy hair you met at the flat with the boy you tolerated  
for sex. Hear her tell herself  
*I'm not in love with a girl*

Stop. Look at the page see  
her reflected up at you  
write a scene where she fucks a stranger in a stairwell (because semi-public sex is  
always more thrilling), have her forget his name, like the time you never asked his.  
Let him fuck you even though you're dry. Go home  
in a taxi  
to cry.

Now punish her  
the character  
the reflection  
the girl looking up at you  
from the page, with the same eyes as you.

Read the first draft edit  
out the bad erotica.  
Struggle through the midpoint  
have her lie on a towel, touch herself  
skin wet from the shower. Remember when  
the touch of another  
would repulse you  
make you sick, but  
don't you dare have her raped.

## Just in case

when the ghost  
of a wind gust nudges  
the door open  
the latch goes clunk  
hinges squeee

the thought does occur to me much like a different thought consumed my friend  
when we crossed the bridge on foot  
*call of the void*

*sometimes I think about throwing  
my phone in the river. what the fuck.*

the thought is:  
*it could be a strange man at the door. he*  
*could*/////////////////////////////////////  
/  
or it's like

when the thought  
*I am mortal*  
*I don't want to die*  
occurs

when the tires  
of your car  
slide  
on black tarmac.

The wind in the  
garden doesn't waft  
through willows; it is a barrage of ice against the will of the  
lavender sprigs  
hardy & perennial, stems so strong  
supple  
resilient  
compliant that they bow  
at first  
then  
spring back in place with the gall of projected agency,  
like each flower is determined to pierce the sky.  
the air doesn't move through the bush  
but around and over the  
jolting lavender. There's always

a moment  
when it's there  
the split second before it's gone. The thought of threat when home alone is as  
instantaneous as the urge to vomit at writhing maggots on a summer's day, or  
the bounce of a fragrant stem.

so yes  
the thought does occur to me  
    and it's repugnant like maggots  
but it's more like an 'oh dear, I've spilt a glass of water' level of panic  
which passes before I even notice it  
                    compared to the gut twisting, lung grasping, neck cricking horror  
of  
                    a 'fuck I am nothing' level of panic when a man takes his hands and  
takes your clothes and takes your spine and leaves and lies and covers it up and you cry  
yourself to sleep for hours on end and respite never comes.

So, yeah

when I'm home alone and the bathroom door creeps open  
while I stand naked in dripping water  
the shhhhhhhh of water against tub

the thought occurs to me that it might be an intruder who's come to assert his death  
wish into my body. But then I remember I am safe in my home. I remember my town  
is windy, and the windows are open for the breeze. I still couldn't leave the door open  
though, you know? Just in case.

## // HOW TO RAPE A CHARACTER IN ANY GENRE 01

CHUCK A FORCED KISS IN A CARTOON. MAKE HIS LIPS  
PROTRUDE FROM HIS PUCKERED FACE, HAVE HER  
PUPILS MOVE SIDE TO SIDE. HER SHOULDERS ARE SEMI-  
CIRCLES BENEATH HER EARS, HIS SCRAWNY HAND GRIPS  
HER ARM. LOVE HEARTS BOOM IN HIS EYES WHEN HE  
PULLS AWAY. HAVE A PEST STALK A CAT IN BLACK.

////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
IMPLY IT IN A ROMANTIC FAIRY TALE. HAVE THE  
PRINCESS COERCED INTO A LOVELESS MARRIAGE.

////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
SANITISE IT FOR GENERAL AUDIENCES. TELL TALES OF  
MAIDENS. PUT THE DAMSELS TO BED. THEY SLUMBER.  
GLOSS OVER THE C WORD, SHOW IT'S OKAY BECAUSE HE  
LOVES HER AT FIRST GAZE, DOESN'T NEED TO SPEAK TO  
HER. HE'S A STRANGER WITH NO MANNERS.

////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
JUST BREW A LOVE POTION IN THE CAULDRON OF A  
CHILDREN'S STORY.

////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////

sh

listen closely:

wordshame words listen wor st worst words wor s t  
s/s/st s t sl t  
slu slu slu  
t/t/t me lush  
me me sh ss sham slush  
sham  
sham slam me  
same me list list listen still words  
shake me rake me ache ache ache  
words wor/wor/wars  
?was me  
war whorewhorewhore wore war what wore wore worn down worn warnwar warn  
war w ar  
swore wordsword sword s-word slutslutslutslitlitlitstillstillstill wordswore  
shame shame words words  
words words worstwords words top s top stopstopstop  
words words words ord  
eal no deal no deal real steal steal stole words st st  
st st  
stoner stoner stoner stone lone listen lo lo low ho hole  
wholeholeholeholeholeholeholeholehole  
worse words worse words worst worst worst words words  
it's a shame  
shame shameshameshame shame *whispers* shame shame shame  
*whispers* shame wish-woo "she"  
*whispers*sshame wish wish wish was shamed *whispers*sshame wish  
*whispers*sshamewishwishwish  
wish  
wish  
wish  
wish it  
wasn't  
sh me

## // HOW TO RAPE A CHARACTER IN ANY GENRE 02

SCROLL THROUGH ALIEN FANFIC. HAVE TENTACLE CREATURES WITH DUAL DICKS DOUBLE PENETRATE HER. TAKE INSPIRATION FROM HENTAI, BUT BE WARY OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION'S IMPACT ON YOUR REPUTATION.

////////////////////  
////////////////////  
DRESS HER IN ICONIC GOLD, BUT DRAPE HER HIPS IN FLOWING FABRICS. CONTRAST THIS TEXTURE WITH METAL — CHAINS ARE IMPORTANT HERE. HAVE A VILLAIN WATCH HER LIKE SHE'S WORKING A POLE. SUBVERT EXPECTATIONS AND HAVE HER STRANGLE HIM WITH THE VERY SHACKLES THAT BOUND HER. POETIC JUSTICE IS PART OF RAPE ESCAPE.

////////////////////  
////////////////////  
PUT HER ON A THRONE SHE NEVER WANTED. SHE'S IN A CASTLE, HEAD HELD HIGH, JEWELS OPULENT, CURLS THAT CURVE AS GENTLY AS A FEATHER FALLS FRAME HER PRETTY FACE. HER EYES ARE A BLANK SLATE. SHE'S MARBLE, COMPRESSED.

////////////////////  
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////////////////////

## don't @ me for defamation

I wanna  
dox  
him but  
through poetry  
want his  
full  
name in  
insistent repetition

you know screeds & screeds of it  
on screens in palms, screens on work desks, screens in lounge rooms, want it seen in  
news, 'Poet *Slams* alleged Rapist', '[Retracted] *Dragged by Rape Victim & Poet*', 'Poetry  
Brings Justice: Rape Poem Goes Viral', 'We Demand Immediate Police Action — Sign the  
petition NOW.'

but the cop lady  
suggested  
implied  
informed me  
that it would be my word against his word, and there isn't any evidence. freeze yourself  
frozen. what if someone thinks I'm a liar?

I would  
title  
the poem  
*rat boi lurks*  
*string beans where they don't*  
*belong a nest of evidence*  
*mattress mouth*  
*ninety degree bend at the waist*

cancel him into oblivion.

except  
that's problematic  
so instead  
I'd fill

half the page  
with FULL NAME FULL NAME FULL  
NAME in-  
-ter--  
spersed

with caps lock lines of RAPIST RAPIST RAPIST

then

ctrl+a  
delete



## // HOW TO RAPE A CHARACTER IN ANY GENRE 03

PLAY A BEDTRICK ON A CONSERVATIVE COUPLE IN A  
CULT CLASSIC.

////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////

GENDER FLIP IT, THE COUGAR'S A FIERCE PREDATOR.

HAVE THE BITCH IN THE PANT SUIT SEDUCE HER  
UNWILLING ASSISTANT. HIS GLASSES SIT ASKEW AS HE  
STUTTERS – “N-N-N-NO, P-P-PLEASE.” ASSOCIATE ABUSE  
WITH BDSM WHEN SHE PULLS OUT CUFFS AND A RIDING  
CROP. OR USE THE SLIP-VIAGRA-IN-HIS-DRINK GAG.

BETTER YET, HAVE THE MILF FUCK HER CHILD'S FRIEND  
— IF STRAIGHT MEN CAN DO IT, STRAIGHT WOMEN CAN  
DO IT TOO, AND EITHER WAY, THERE'S TITTIES.

////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////

INCARCERATE HIM WITH SOAP ON A STRING. USE THIS

REFERENCE AS A PUNCHLINE.

////////////////////////////////////  
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////////////////////////////////////



## Femme Fatale

x would mark the spot  
                                if she  
                                knew  
                where she wanted to be  
*make me monstrous* / note the  
plea the guttural  
*oohhh-please*  
cover with tangled sheets

after the gasp of a  
vile black out

leave the vicinity of my misaligned chakra

                                host your hate  
                in smiles  
                                joke's  
                on prank's on  
knives on

everyone else is ember shadow party glow

*Rorschach*  
*test me*  
quell paper,  
scarlet tissues  
                inkblot  
wretched smears from lips  
                stick to  
toilet paper  
blood from  
gums  
of teeth that fall  
out every night

metallic taste

her mascara  
heavy eyes aren't looking at you  
even when she  
stares  
into the camera lens

from the page canvas screen she doesn't care who you are red

                                lips curled hair  
close- up close- up close- up

she overwhelms  
monstrous eyes  
bedroom smoky  
black liquid *babygirl* powder blush      gold glitter lips  
red eyes red tangled hair

she will not look away

her  
mouth no gash  
lips not folded pillows of flash tatt edge-  
wound

her mouth is not a fault line between ridges for you to climb  
eyes black  
hair black  
you think her heart's black  
smirk lips      she'll seduce morality      fuck it  
senseless black

wear heels

don't tip me  
away from him  
never  
wear blood      after labour day

impassive murder veins      it's not a smirk

her mouth is nothing

lips will not part  
legs  
will

her mouth is not a wound  
her make up not a      gauze mask      strong gaze  
break      o      p      e      n      her epistemological trauma

## toile

Taschen  
twentyfifthanniversary!  
'One  
Thousand Dessous' *oh la la, française!*

'adverbe'  
trans; 'beneath'  
'underneath'  
pardon my anglaise:  
géndér suffix?

trans; ( 'trans'  
; prefix — across) noun — 'bottom'  
| top  
switch  
floor

"I think it would be different if it were written by a woman. It's very..."

*érotique*

stuffed frog navy stripe beret

did you know that 'moustache' is the french spelling of the word?

*A La French*  
— sexy.

FASH·uh·nuh·BL  
darling passion

for pashin'

word of open mouth  
invitation — consider —

women.

measure  
fit  
dart  
pintuck pleat make it  
fit the smell of  
cardboard dress  
block label seam  
allowance

the sensation of post orgasm as likened to death. pardon  
my french kissing

(sharpen your shears or your scissors won't glide straight)

(silver shrieks, the shrill banshee of sharpening blades)

♪♪♪ Aphrodite lady seashell bikini ♪♪♪

reprint: alleged desecration of land // womb]

fabric marker, breast cup, measure the chest at the nipple line, sharpie la tétine,  
butt cheeks, drop back, no bra  
spine.

strangers leer

## Turn up the volume

hyper

pop     when \

you /t UH      ch/ me ♪ i die ♪♪♪

♪♪ So HA-pii

*i*

could      die ♪♪♪♪♪

loop Gaga

♪♪♪you're just a

swine in ♪ side a hu

[illegible]

Lady save me from our  
pain I will hang bleeding

14

## // HOW TO RAPE A CHARACTER IN ANY GENRE 04

BARBARIANS LOOK BEST WHEN THEY'RE COVERED IN MUD — SO CAST A TOTALLY MASC STUD AS THE HERO. DON'T MIND THAT HE LEADS HIS TROOPS TO RAID THE VILLAGE OF HIS ENEMIES, BURN THE THATCHED ROOFS AND WOODEN BARNs. WHILE HORSES FLEE, THEIR WAILING NEIGHS COVER THE SCREAMS OF THE WOMEN FOLKS' ASSAULT. THE KNIGHTS DO IT TOO, ARMED WITH SWORDS TO SHEATH IN CONFIDENCE ONCE THEY'RE WITHIN THE WALLS. VINDICATE THE FORMER WITH A GOOD PIRATE WHO DRINKS, PLUNDERS AND SLURS, BUT PROTECTS THE PRETTY YOUNG THING IN THE CORSETED WHITE LACE FROCK, EVEN IF HE DOES ROLL HIS EYES.

The image features a dense, repeating pattern of diagonal lines. These lines are arranged in horizontal rows, with each row containing many closely spaced, parallel strokes. The overall effect is a textured, woven appearance, similar to a fine mesh or a stylized fabric pattern. The lines are dark gray or black, set against a plain white background. The pattern is uniform and covers the entire area of the image.

## What is a bed?

cave

where you cuddle

huddle play  
hide sister & brother

*Who's in the cave with me!?*

hibernates her cubs,  
sunshine voice lights  
the dim

narrates

dad's 9am shift end

*Can you hear keys? He's coming up the stairs now, clomp, clomp, clomp...*

crinkle

giggle nose

bury your face in talcum powder  
skin sister hair strands in your eyes

fingers itch to  
twirl

but she said no,

& the rules are:

*We don't touch other people without their permission*

*Gentle, gentle, gentle* even

if it's teddy-bear soft

goldilocks yellow-like-butter ringlets

*...that's the front door – listen* key  
turns lock.

I never remember him arriving.

is a bed?

a nest

for reading?

large floor

mattress room

hearth & home

soft spot in the house

home is

where? is

sister questions;

brother's needling

turn the page

keep reading



what  
is a bed?

a wrestling ring?  
where you tussle and roll with little brother  
grown stronger than you?

a bridge when the floor is lava?  
your sister learns the phrase 'obstacle course'  
brother always aces it with a grin, you follow suit,  
shoulder roll onto the bed,  
a pro gymnast crash landing pad?

(yes) fling  
your  
body  
around  
twist your torso  
spiral  
spine.

what is a bed? is  
it the platform  
for adolescent unbuttoning? frottage?  
the place you lay  
pose sexy ride

what is a bed?  
but a place  
where you sleep  
thrown in the dark  
by a man you don't know

what is a bed?  
but a place your friends find you  
naked alone  
sheets tangled

What about now?  
What is a bed?

Is it a bunker? A bomb shelter? A safe house in the wake of crisis?  
The place you curl in on yourself,  
dislocate shoulder  
foetal pose suck your sob

a hollow thumb trench//  
//ditch linearity  
roll over

*You can't make someone play with you if they don't want to*  
& over

if only it were a refuge asylum  
: clinical diagnosis

exhausted

can't sleep won't  
sleep shadow brat  
night terrors  
harbour doubts you'll... ever... drift... off  
without nightmares again

because *your*  
bed was  
the site of the incident  
a bed is a crime scene

## Klimt's Danaë

77x83

she might bleed on  
canvas that hair  
lips part soft  
legs light splay  
he painted her  
skin so flesh-like  
warm shoulder cascade  
she's curled spine curved  
woman sleeping, model's joints  
stiffen ache  
sleeps nude  
ribcage

periodic Au  
elemental gold  
the sound you make when you stub your  
toe sperm is C  
the stuff of all life  
swimming in protein  
put it in a word scrambler  
and out pops /zeus/  
    never expected  
    always drifting  
edge of frame — sleeping princess, pending settlement  
    ready to rain fecundity

her father would have blamed her  
her fault  
her fault  
her fault  
Janine at the red centre  
encircled by beaten  
feet whipped skin

when they were girls — Danaë, Offred,  
Moirai they were free like daughters  
untainted  
by a world  
that doesn't want  
them in the streets  
wants them  
raped in their sheets.

Princess Danaë of  
Argos forever frozen



before it all changed  
the light  
not too bright my  
bedsheets soft  
against my naked  
because I didn't wear  
& he was thirsty.

## // HOW TO RAPE A CHARACTER IN ANY GENRE 05

HIRE TARANTINO.

////////////////////

PIMP OUT A COMA PATIENT. REALLY ABUSE YOUR FEMALE PROTAGONIST SO THAT HER VENGEANCE IS GOREY AND ACTION-PACKED! NOW, THAT'S A STRONG, INDEPENDENT WOMAN.

////////////////////

GET *MEDIEVAL* ON THE *HILLBILLY* BASTARDISER.

The image features a dense, repeating pattern of diagonal hatching lines. The lines are thin, black, and oriented at a 45-degree angle, sloping downwards from left to right. They are arranged in approximately 20 horizontal rows, with a small gap between each row, creating a textured, woven appearance. The pattern covers the entire rectangular area of the image.

## toughen up buttercup

no to thick skin  
no to grow a thicker skin  
no i have no thickest skin  
yes to skin so thin  
i'm sorry for the rhyme  
but  
it hovers in  
the sky                      it's filmy  
the air  
your hair  
around you  
through you  
into you  
& out  
of you                      like a kite in a breeze  
                    except it's  
flimsy tissue paper  
wings of a cicada  
a fly  
sucked dry, oh my  
i'm sorry for the rhyme

                    i wanted to say : *i will not harden myself*  
                    *against the friction*  
                    *of this*  
                    *world*

i'm not callous  
                    my skin isn't hardened  
                    instead i blister                      under the constant rub                      of *this world* against me

drown in the fluid-filled  
bubble

                    pop  
                                    there is no band aid  
                                    with enough cartoon  
                                    princesses to cover                      this encrustation  
peel back  
check scabs  
a diamond crown on the wound the jewels glint in clichéd  
ruby  
scarlet  
blood  
red shards  
pearls dribble out too





arrogance or atleast, not if i'll do it before or after i stomp on his  
ball-buster  
bitch

in my dreams  
because in  
real life  
i sleep scream for help

& i wanna knock out

non human concepts  
strangle ideologies that prickle down my spine, stab in my gut

it hurts to be flayed, split open, cut with no scalpel anyone ever  
saw burnt  
tarnished                      so i roll my eyes  
   go home later to  
cry i'm sorry for the rhyme.

## Call the Police

DML214: J\*\*l W\*ls\*n  
certified concrete  
grind against red metal  
collide  
blame  
desert  
event number P045276442  
*we'll cover the damages*

one week later —  
my body hotwired  
screaming man in the street  
onlookers onlookers onlookers under  
6 foot  
face full of ink  
skin head  
she's short and round  
& steps back when he invades her space  
*thank you for your call, we'll get that information out to our patrol cars*  
can't help the thought that they'll do nothing, but my body was a trauma tremor  
the nerves in my fingers pulsed hot

local police  
station sanitise  
hands scan in  
late for class  
meltdown in the  
foyer small town  
refer to victim support  
there is no recourse

don't park that Firth truck anywhere near my little  
garage *it's not dangerous driving*  
*no evidence he did it deliberately, despite that one line where he said he did it*  
*deliberately some people are just assholes*  
*people say things they don't*  
*mean* victim support worker  
shares her PTSD struggles — gangs and rapes and the terror scream of metal on metal  
suggests crystals.  
I never pressed charges

when he  
pressed torso  
against skin

I couldn't press charges  
when his  
phallic work truck scraped  
my bumper.

there is no recourse for the powerless  
the scree of blue bonnet on white  
the graaaunch of metal grate windscreen  
the falling feeling  
the falling feeling  
the falling feeling  
I hate it when my heart beats fast I  
hate it when my breath paces  
I hate it when the world spins.  
Sam's arms

*I*  
*d*  
*on't-t-t kn-kn-*  
*know whattodo*  
*to m \*gasp\* ma-*  
*ma-make m*  
*m*  
*m*  
*men sssto p \*gasp\**  
*att- t*  
*ta -cking*  
*me. I j-j-j-j-j*  
*just wanttobe saaafe.*

*You can't control other people. But you can look for the ones you trust.*

*Th-th-they th-th-think*  
*\*gasp\* I-I-I'm a b-b-bitch.*

*You're not, honey. I love you.*

*I j*  
*ust \*gasp\**  
*want*  
*to-be o \*gasp\**  
*kay.*

*You just want to feel safe.*

*I jus*

[illegible]

*It's okay, honey. I'm here. You're safe. You're in my arms. It's okay.*

*Hooooooooooooo \*gasp\* hooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo \*gasp\**

*Deep breaths, honey.*

*I'm \*gasp\* t-t-try*

*ing \*gasp\* \*gasp\* \*gasp\**

*It's okay. I'm here. You're not alone.*

hurricane midpoint  
tempest lullaby

## // HOW TO RAPE A CHARACTER IN ANY GENRE 06

USE MONARCHY TO EXCUSE IT — PRESERVE A HOLY  
TOME WHERE CONCUBINES BATHE FOR THEIR KING. USE  
HISTORICAL ACCURACY TO EXCUSE IT — HIGH FANTASY  
IS FULL OF WHORES AND VICTIMS. WATCH THEM SCRUB  
THE SHAME FROM THEIR SKIN IN A LONG SHOT THAT  
JUST WON'T FADE.

AN EYE FOR AN EYE. SHE GETS RAPED, HE GETS  
CHLAMYDIA. NOT FROM HER THOUGH, SHE'S CLEAN. OR  
WAS.

////////////////////////////////////  
 //////////////////////////////////////  
 MIX IT UP WITH A LUCKY ESCAPE, CURSE THOSE PESKY  
 BOYS WHO WON'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER. SWIFTLY  
 INTRODUCE A MALE SAVIOUR. DON'T MENTION IT.

The image features a dense, repeating pattern of diagonal hatching lines. The lines are thin, black, and slanted at approximately a 45-degree angle. They are arranged in horizontal rows, with each row containing many closely spaced lines that extend across the entire width of the image. The overall effect is a textured, grayish background created by the high frequency of the black lines.

## Public Panic

although  
this is a  
pandemic  
I am  
not  
in a panic.

I've felt  
unsafe before  
i've self  
isolated  
before  
i've been  
scared  
of other people  
before  
my  
mother hasn't  
understood before

why is it?  
That we can?  
Talk about the terror of  
a car crash the chaos  
of covid,  
but?  
We can  
not talk about  
rape?

I saw a tweet  
along the lines of *funny how now that it's able bodied people who need  
accessibility education is going online.*  
I'm paraphrasing  
possibly.

But,  
*good point*  
I think like how  
now  
people respect my personal bubble.  
I've not  
felt this aura before. I've tensed up in coffee lines  
because someone  
a man  
a stranger  
my boyfriend

a  
part  
of  
me. It's on my skin  
&  
in  
my flesh  
& it buzzed through my body until it in my left calf. Settled

the shape of an almond                      or  
it's eye shaped                      or  
tear shaped  
   compressed.  
When I meditate                      to sleep  
I dread  
scanning past my ankle  
sending my muscles                      to sleep  
it's not safe                      to sleep                      when  
your neighbour is a  
rapist.

Will there be?

Fewer?

Cases of rape?

Because of covid?

Oh

wait — most rapists  
are known  
to their victim.  
with their abuser.

Some are isolated

But maybe

I'm safer in public now than ever before? Maybe the threat of

a really bad flu  
is a stronger deterrent  
than the law?  
Can I go?  
For a walk?  
At night?

Or would my mother  
still  
word her worry  
as a thinly veiled  
rape threat.  
*Oh, you shouldn't be out  
roaming about  
the streets after dark*  
when I ask why? She'll only say  
*it isn't safe!*

*Something*

*could happen to you!*

The worry is the

same when my sister  
cycles home & I curse her  
in silence.  
Because i  
follow her curfew into my  
twenties for the simple fact  
that the vocal concern slices like i'm a chastised minor, dependent, lady

when I do walk at night  
I think of  
the pisstake scene in a movie i've seen where

the lone woman  
in a carpark  
is jumped & when she punches him in the face with her keys between her fingers  
(protruding like jagged talons from her knuckles) the keys lodge  
in his cheek.

He is otherwise undeterred. & continues  
to abduct her. Ha ha!

Funny  
comedy. Now my false faith in the safety of my  
keyfists

is gone.



## No one chooses to be born

We don't own  
our bodies  
like a renting solo mum  
doesn't own  
the roof over  
her childrens' heads.

*Life can*  
*be so*  
*cruel* rings trite  
but it's  
true.

We — I'm  
not sure who  
"we" are — "we" might be empty cicada shells  
walking souls

float  
above  
it  
all while your  
corpse, our corpses  
trudge through the

world. They — we  
trudge

because we carry the dragging deadweight of our past on rattling chains  
with false grins false grins false grins.

We do  
not have a home  
in our raped bodies.

Just deep abrasions

& a longing to be curled in the wombs of our mothers.

## // HOW TO RAPE A CHARACTER IN ANY GENRE 07

REMINDE EVERYONE THAT WOMEN LIE WITH A FALSE  
ACCUSATION. *IT WAS BLACK TOM*. HAVE AN INNOCENT  
IMBECILE STROKE A WOMAN'S DRESS. SYMPATHISE  
WITH HIM AS HE RUNS FROM THE ANGRY MOB WHO  
BELIEVE HER WHEN SHE SAYS HE STROKED *HER*. AFTER  
ALL THERE IS A SEMANTIC DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE  
FABRIC WHICH SEPARATES THE WORLD FROM SELF, AND  
THE SKIN WHICH DOES THE SAME.

////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
BURY HER UNDERGROUND. USE BLACK INK TO CREATE  
STRIKING IMAGERY OF A NERD CANNIBAL. THE WOMAN'S  
BODY SHOULD COMPRISE MOST OF THE FRAME. CAST A  
SHADOW ACROSS HER MOURNFUL FEATURES. HER ARMS  
ARE TIED ABOVE HER HEAD FOR THE OPTIMAL BALANCE  
BETWEEN BUOYANCY AND GRAVITY ON THE  
UNDERCURE OF EACH TIT. HER ARMPITS ARE HAIRLESS  
DESPITE WEEKS OF CAPTIVITY, REPRESENTED BY THE  
RAW STUMPS AT MID THIGH. SHE'S A TASTY LITTLE  
SNACK.

////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////  
////////////////////////////////////

## Herein Lies: Polarised Thinking, Overgeneralisation & Emotional Reasoning

I bought a sticker  
it's pink pastel tones — pop feminism there are  
legs, with hair  
*redefine femininity* slogan

I've always been a fan of restoration  
over abolition

but then I'm soft

I'm getting too old to know  
if I'm up  
to  
date

on The Internet Discourse it shifts so swift  
but I read enough tumblr 2014 to learn the  
term ~~bierasure~~ *biphobia*  
and understand it like when I was a teenager and boys gawked at me and a girl  
tumbling on the couch through the window. As though anything women do with their  
bodies — especially when they're sharing — is for others. It's public  
property. because it's not a *real* private moment, it's performative, attention  
seeking. because I feel like I'm a hack in my straight-passing relationship  
tiktok isn't helping  
I keep on doubting  
my own thoughts & feelings shut up about compulsory heterosexuality  
don't remove my agency  
don't turn my love for my partner into a farce  
don't negate the throb in my vulva, the yearning in my opening when I see-touch-taste  
his hard on. Or think of the colour between her legs four years ago.

I keep wondering about the binary in the label bisexual. I can't escape this  
dichotomous thinking. Non binary is not mine to define & I'm sorry if my label shrouds you  
in invisibility. I feel pressure to be intersectional in the language of my own identity.

once I convinced  
my best friend  
to text a boy we knew  
from her phone to convince him we had kissed. or maybe she suggested it. either way,  
I had a crush on her, and I took his incredulity as intrigue.

I bought a sticker from the same artist. it's a vibrator  
*good vibes only*

pale pink	nude	blush	
	lilac	baby blue	add sparkle
groovy font			

tinder never helped. even when  
my bio read:

fuckin' sucker for clear communication. bi & looking for fwb. in a relationship.  
one woman instantly ghosted me when I dropped into conversation that I had a  
partner, and used the pronoun 'he'

*redefine* femininity?

*define* femininity

& don't define femininity. I wore my boyfriend's six ex-el pants

yesterday posted to tiktok about it

violated community standards

adult nudity, fully clothed. I had no bra on under my singlet femininity (n): the  
shock horror of nipples on mammary glands.

when all else fails

be horny and irreverent because

*no* one listens anyway

## // HOW TO RAPE A CHARACTER IN ANY GENRE 08

BURY HER UNDERGROUND, BUT MAKE IT BUBBLEGUM. IT'S FUNNY THAT THE SUBTERRANEAN PRISONER MISSED SO MANY POP CULTURE MEMES. IT'S NOT LIKE JOSEPH FRITZL RAISED *FOUNDLINGS* BREWED IN THE BASEMENT. NOTE THAT THE NEWS REPORTED THAT MRS FRITZL KNEW NOTHING OF HER DAUGHTERS AND GRANDDAUGHTER-DAUGHTERS.

//////////////////////////////////////  
 //////////////////////////////////////  
 HUNT WOMEN DOWN IN A DYSTOPIA WHERE WE ARE  
 OUR SEX. BARREN OR FERTILE, LAND FOR THE  
 PLOUGHING.

The image features a repeating pattern of slanted parallel lines. These lines are arranged in horizontal rows, with each row containing approximately 20 lines. The lines are slanted at a consistent angle, creating a textured, woven appearance. The pattern is uniform across the entire image, with no text or other graphical elements present.

## Aerial Art

I cling to the idea  
of linear time  
as if the grips on the indoor rock wall  
are as solid and permanent as the material  
as if it's the rope my belay holds  
as if I'm harnessed to reality

time is a lifeline  
*this too shall pass*  
it's a lifesaver red  
& circular  
buoyant on the tide

my umbilical cord  
is a tightrope on which  
generations of women before me  
balance  
back to the past  
& now I carry on

I won't follow in their footsteps  
I stand on their shoulders — pole dance  
doubles fling myself aerial  
toes pointed  
legs split  
true middle split  
forced front splits  
flying into the future  
where I levitate with Harrison Bergeron.

No guns out  
even when the sun's out

freeze utopia  
in the hellfeeling of eternity  
on perpetual loop  
a motion that the  
moment of most ecstasy  
is electric — pins & needles in the fabric of  
existence  
etcetera  
etcetera  
etcetera

children can  
contort backbend  
bridge

because their muscles do not  
cling grip  
hold to the bones the same way our tense  
over used  
pink fibres bind themselves to our  
skeletal frames  
what remains is  
tight / taut / torn  
trapezius bound  
what is chest?  
shoulders? spine?

back?

pirouette on the centre point of a clockface  
watch  
never ending  
    the never ending infinity  
    of the moment before you

drop

gut swoop  
apex  
silk sling silver  
the hammock catches my fall      but    the feeling    w    o    n    '    t  
    f      a      d      e      .

I cling

to the concept of  
linear time because  
    I *need* that to be then  
so this can be                      now.

**It's human to**

cry when you

fall

on your face

when your top

half is thrown

forward

back

half held

in place

rammed

inside.

It's okay that you chose to shut down & turn off. It's okay that you hate your

own

fucking

body, hate it right to the edges from the inside out

feel like public property

My body is a

mannequin

in a store window

the kind of store

that Julia Roberts' character in *Pretty Woman* would be expected to shop at. Her and Fran Drescher's frugal aunt sift through second hand garbage in bins that smell of moths and mould.

My body

is a vessel for liquid sunshine when

I meditate but

most of the time

I am brimming with the hot hot highlighter yellow of a

firewarden's hi vis jacket and there are sirens in my mind in my mind in my mind and

they go wee-ooooh, wee-ooooh, wee-ooooh while my heart goes bbump-bbump-

bbump-bbump

Not *most* of the time

but some.

My therapist says *your amygdala hijacks your brain*

and the plumes of smoke from the

twin towers and the scrolling headlines at the bottom of the screen, and the scream,

scream, scream of sirens under the even voices of news reporters appear. The

cartoon fairies giggle on the other channel and that's where I learnt the word 'hijack'

My body is filled

with trauma

My insides are like the coathanger bin under the counter at the store where

(upon closer inspection) there are chips

& cracks

in the mannequin

skin



the traumas tangle in with one another, black plastic hooks latched onto one another, the slots for shirt straps snag on one another. I can't extricate the thermometer from the tequila from all the times I've imagined the death of my mother when all I really want is a thousand deaths to Dad.

## // HOW TO RAPE A CHARACTER IN ANY GENRE 08

DON'T EVEN BOTHER WITH THE INCIDENT OR PTSD,  
TRAUMA FLASHBACKS AREN'T SEXY. EQUIP THIS  
BROKEN BIRD WITH SNARK. FORGET THERE'S ANY  
MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN ALCOHOLIC AND  
INSTITUTIONALISED, BETWEEN NIHILISM AND SELF  
ACTUALISATION.

A dense, repeating pattern of small, slanted, parallel lines, resembling a textured surface or a stylized background. The lines are black and slanted at approximately 45 degrees, creating a fine, woven appearance. They are arranged in a regular, repeating grid-like fashion across the entire image.

**Stop.**

*I love*

*it*

*when you*

*hold*

*me*

*down*

*& fuck*

*me*

moan

huge hand

splay over spine

press shoulder blades

mouth

full, full, full

he asks

if I'm

okay when he is

so my

in me

breath

sharp and

the memory

of

face down

falling

forced forwards

fades. That's a lie. It

grows

makes me tense

but

in a good way

it rises

makes

my heart

beat

but then

I've always

liked

rough sex that I

can

stop

with 1 word.