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Harvest: Poems

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HARVEST

by

Brittney S. Allen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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Logan, Utah

2020

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ABSTRACT

Harvest

by

Brittney S. Allen, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2020

Major Professor: Prof. Shanan Ballam
Department: English

Louise Glück wrote, “the actual making of art is a revenge on circumstance.” The risk, she goes on, is in the possibility of shame. Writing poetry then becomes an act of courage, purchased with sacrifice or loss. “Courage, in this usage, alludes to a capacity for facing down the dark forces.”

In *Harvest*, a poetry chapbook, the speaker takes revenge on the circumstances of her life by being blunt, bare, and brave on the page. She contends with a male-dominated society and abusive childhood as she moves into adulthood and the supposed saving grace of a marriage. The speaker confesses traumatic memories, marital betrayals, and harmful coping mechanisms in a lyrical way, adding her voice to the abused poets of past and present who have also asked themselves – *how can a raped daughter grow up to love a man?* In an attempt to break the silence forced upon her by an abusive parent, the speaker examines the pattern of sexual failures in her life, as well as her roles as a female, daughter, sister, and wife through poetry. My speaker has excavated her inner child and bared her most intimate parts in poetry. By attempting to exorcize her stepfather to make room for her husband, she found the potential for fierce love in her sibling relationships. In reaching for them, my speaker reaches for herself instead of another man.

(46 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Harvest

Brittney S. Allen

Louise Glück wrote, “the actual making of art is a revenge on circumstance.” The risk, she goes on, is in the possibility of shame. Writing poetry then becomes an act of courage, purchased with sacrifice or loss. “Courage, in this usage, alludes to a capacity for facing down the dark forces.”

In *Harvest*, a poetry chapbook, the speaker takes revenge on the circumstances of her life by being blunt, bare, and brave on the page. She contends with a male-dominated society and abusive childhood as she moves into adulthood and the supposed saving grace of a marriage. The speaker confesses traumatic memories, marital betrayals, and harmful coping mechanisms in a lyrical way, adding her voice to the abused poets of past and present who have also asked themselves – *how can a raped daughter grow up to love a man?* In an attempt to break the silence forced upon her by an abusive parent, the speaker examines the pattern of sexual failures in her life, as well as her roles as a female, daughter, sister, and wife through poetry. My speaker has excavated her inner child and bared her most intimate parts in poetry. By attempting to exorcize her stepfather to make room for her husband, she found the potential for fierce love in her sibling relationships. In reaching for them, my speaker reaches for herself instead of another man.

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Brittney S. Allen

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INTRODUCTION

Breaking Silence: Marriage & Love After Abuse

When I prepared to write my thesis, I envisioned another journey. My proposal opened with a discussion of Anne Sexton, how her “courage to make a clean breast of it” as she wrote about “female issues” (like menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery, and addiction) encouraged me to write blatantly. I wanted to write bare-chested poems like Sexton, confessionally baring my childhood sexual abuses and resultant coping mechanisms in an intimate way. Writing erotically about abuse was what I had always done; there was abuse at the hands of my stepfather and the self-abusive relationships I carried out after. I attempted to make sense of it all by sexualizing the pain and confusion; control over the telling of my experience felt like all I had. If it was erotic, I looked less like a victim.

Yet that rationalization didn’t fill in enough blank spots. I wanted to explore the ways abuse becomes sexualized in writing, so I studied Sexton and other confessional and contemporary poets who write about sexual abuse, such as Marie Howe, Olena Kalytiak Davis, and Ocean Vuong. By studying poets who did what I was doing, I hoped to find answers as I excavated my speaker’s psychological and physical landscapes, examined the gashes left behind in her psyche after a childhood of abuse. I wanted to understand and craft the way my speaker reacts and contributes to the cycles of abuse, addiction, and control.

My young marriage, however, repeatedly took center stage as I wrote. “How can a woman love a man?” is a question posed at the end of many of Marie Howe’s poems from her book *What the Living Do*, and it is certainly one my speaker slams against over and over again in light of childhood violations. Is there a saving grace for her in a marriage? Is a healthy

relationship possible after such destructive beginnings? How do you tell the difference in the dark between the man who loves you and the man who hurts you?

After the confessional poets opened the door on personal emotional and mental violations in writing, poets writing today take their freedom of subject choice and shatter it at will. Some post-confessional writers don't hide, but omit. An entire poem about rape doesn't have to say the word once, such as can be seen in Olena Kalytiak Davis's "The Poem She Didn't Write." At least one noun is consistently left out, referenced only by empty underlining, as in line 59: "there were no hidden references to _____." A second speaker runs the length of the poem alongside the first, speaking in parenthetical italics to haunt the primary speaker, seen twice side-by-side in line 25: "*(please stop)(please shut the fuck up)*." A fractured speaker is clearly wrought with omitted trauma—it is up to the reader to intuit rape, as the subject of Davis's poem is something the speaker can't write down.

Our culture today is a hostile place for the female survivor. As of November 2018, an estimated 88.2% of rapes in Utah alone go unreported, making the known statistics much lower than the truth. The rape rate in Utah has been consistently higher than the national average over time, increasing by 10.7% between 2014 and 2017 (Mitchell). Having been born, raised, and raped in Utah, my speaker is aware of the context surrounding her individual traumas and strives to give voice to her experiences at such a pertinent time. She struggles with speaking after growing up under a silencing abuser. With the present studded with hashtags like "#MeToo" and "#whyididntreport," followed by waves of confession of victimhood behind the screen of social media, the time to talk about sexual abuse is now.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on their 2017 Sexual Violence Fact Sheet claimed, "Women with a history of sexual assault are more likely to attempt or commit

suicide than other women.” In many ways, my speaker writes as a means of self-examination and manic deflection against “dying of the truth,” an expression borrowed from Maxine Kumin’s introduction to *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*. By examining the way violence is made erotic, my speaker confronts and reflects upon her experience navigating a culture, marriage, and psyche where sex determines worth.

Themes

In her attempts to break silence and understand herself, my speaker examines patterns of sexual failure and her roles as wife, daughter, sister, and woman after surviving her girlhood. Nearly all the poems in this collection fall into one (or both) of these categories.

Sexual Failure

To my speaker, “sexual failure” primarily encompasses fear related to intimacy with the opposite sex. There are sexual failures and betrayals within the marriage bond, as well as internal hangups about intimacy that interfere with my speaker’s ability to perform sexually. At times she loathes her body and libido, and at others she’ll do whatever it takes to sleep with someone. She hates men and she needs them. She marries one and fears as well as loves him.

An included poem, “Inscape,” explores the internal struggle of survivorhood. My speaker creates a concrete and fissured metaphor for her inner psychological landscape, describing how the self-abuse she enacts with her body is to fill her emotional “potholes” and silence her suffering. Like Davis’s poem, the word “rape” or other explicit sexual abuse-related words are not used, but the reader can intuit intimate violence by the word choices and omissions in the final stanzas of the poem:

Years deep, my husband watches me
shoot spirits down my cracks, spew
pools of vomit and gaping sky.

I ask his body to fill the rest.
I tell the therapist there are potholes
in my chest, caves where my fathers drilled.

She puts a vibrating node in each palm, plugs
me to a hypnotic machine purring
left... right... left... right...

a naked child grinds herself to chalk
against my ribcage, rattling
gravel in her lungs. She needs

to know he didn't mean to hurt
her, not really, he knows girls
made of stone don't bleed.

Even though my speaker is married, grown and out from under the thumb of her
“fathers,” she feels weighted and chained to her childhood abuses. The husband is not wholly
made innocent, as the “he” in the final lines is never specifically stapled to either the fathers or
the husband. This communicates that her fear has generalized to her husband, if not all men.

The included poem “Mastectomy” communicates both a fear of sexlessness as well as an
ingrained dependence on males for identity and safety. Here my speaker lies beside her husband
in bed musing about her breasts, meditating on her grandmother's mastectomy and decimated
sex life. This poem captures the speaker's anxiety about not only hereditary cancers, an
uncontrollable fate, but more so about the death of her own sex life. Breasts are equated with sex
as the speaker parallels herself with her sexless grandmother, as can be seen in the final stanzas:

Men stopped sleeping with my grand-
Mother after the surgeon took
Her left breast away: at thirty-three

She hid the puckered frown of bare

Chest beneath padded bras where once
My grandfather, my uncle, and
My father sucked. At night
I nurse my husband now,

Even as my grandmother closes
Her eyes, gives thanks to the knife.

Even after entering upon the supposed saving grace of marriage, my speaker struggles with the extent to which sex defines her, its violent power over her marital happiness and emotional well-being. Throughout my thesis, my speaker wrestles with the appetites and voids her childhood abuse pressed upon her, compromising her safety both physically and emotionally as she uses tries to drown her demons through an alcohol addiction. She struggles to understand the conflicting ways sex in her adult life makes her feel both weak and empowered. Ultimately, she wants to know if she can love a man.

Female Roles

Other than the speaker's role as wife, the most interesting role she plays is that of oldest sister. Many poems insinuate a slippery form of survivor's guilt, especially when she reflects on the children still living at home under the man who abused her. In many ways the love my speaker has for her siblings, sisters and brothers both, supercede her anxieties over romantic relationships. For this reason, the collection begins and ends with poems about her brothers—perhaps the only men my speaker could ever love unquestioningly.

My speaker's role as a daughter is equally fraught and fractured. While clearly a victim of her stepfather, the speaker's relationship with her mother isn't safe or innocent either. The mother chooses the abusive stepfather over her daughter, a thread most clearly expressed in

“Selfish.” Speaking of my speaker’s brother, the poem reads:

I’ve only seen him twice since last year.

It all leads back
to what his father did to me;

the betrayal of our mother demands
another name I don’t know how to say.

What I do know is that in every cell swims
a piece of my brother, and we share
50% of the same DNA—

but the man who fucked my mother to father
him fucked me the same way.

What do I get to say when our mother
knows all and remarried him anyway?

My speaker questions the extent of her mother’s involvement, as can be seen in the poem
“Harvest,” where it is implied the speaker’s mother knew about the abuses and chose to feign
innocence and ignorance:

... Daddy gathered
me to him, his cold erection pawing my spine.
Mom could have been an acre away,
or doe-still behind the next stalk.
My straw body lifted with her husband’s groans, fell with his sigh.

“I don’t understand marriage. I don’t understand how to be a wife,” author Sue William
Silverman writes in her memoir about her childhood sexual abuse, *Because I Remember Terror,
Father, I Remember You*. “I am lost from the start because all I know is how to play a role, how
to *look right*—what I learned from my parents. From them I learned the importance of
appearances, not bothering with the inconvenience of a true inner life” (215). As an adult at the

end of the memoir, Silverman struggles to know how to be a woman, a wife, and a potential mother when she never knew what it was to just be a daughter. She doesn't want to become a parent who passes the cycle of molestation on; thus she sabotages her body with an eating disorder and her intimate relationships with a sex addiction.

My speaker likewise carries the fear of adult female roles because of her lack in foundational family structures. Although she feels parental protection for her younger siblings, she is powerless against their mother and father. She also feels displaced as a daughter by the betrayal of her parents; Silverman too writes about not understanding parents who desired status and silence more than the safety of their daughters. "If my mother won't protect me, I will protect myself," Silverman says—and so too my speaker tries to carve her own solitary way into adulthood (214).

Influences

With Sexton's determination to "make a clean breast of it," I sought out poets, memoirists, fiction writers, and visual artists to inform my approach. In preparation for writing my thesis, I conducted a literature review where I read and reviewed many works dealing in abuse. I read many collections by contemporary poets writing confessionally—that is, who (like Sexton) wrote explicitly about themselves and personal daily living. It is from my research that I found strong ties to poets Olena Kalytiak Davis, Marie Howe, and Louise Glück.

Olena Kalytiak Davis

Full of fragmented meditations and broken singing, Davis's poems are difficult to pin to a definition. Even her titles begin with conjunctions, such as "And," throwing readers off balance

and implying an unsolvable conflict from the start. Her lyrical poetry is both contemporary and other-worldly, invoking birds and history and sex as things both ingrained and untouchable. Without clear reference to abuse in her past, Davis's speaker perpetuates self-abuse, both mentally and in her intimate relationships. Davis uses poetry to circumvent the heavy topics of suicide and depression, condemning a speaker who plays both victim and perpetrator with each turn of the page. From her prize-winning books, *And Her Soul Out of Nothing* and *The Poem She Didn't Write and Other Poems*, I sought to experiment with Davis's fluidity, mimicking her ability to dance with the void of incomprehensible feeling without (yet) falling in.

Once again referencing my poem "Harvest," the poem ends on a chilling and impersonal note:

Whatever he found reaching for my underwear
almost made him weep.
God knows why.

Thus my speaker concludes the poem at a distance. Instead of hearing what she thought of her stepfather reaching for her underwear, we read an emotionless observation of him. Then we jump even further from the speaker's point of view by shifting the responsibility of understanding upon "God," an unreachable and unknowable potential being. In this way, like Davis, my speaker illustrates the void of understanding.

Marie Howe

Similar to my speaker, Howe's confessional speaker in *What The Living Do* navigates childhood sexual abuse as she grows into a world indifferent to her. Writing about intimacy, despair, and survival amidst loss in the forms of abuse, death, and divorce, Howe writes plainly

and without sentimentality. Readers are taken from the speaker's violated childhood bed to the bedside of a dying and loved brother in distanced examinations of grief. Poems in the last third of the collection circle around cycles of hopelessness and self-sacrificing sex, both themes shared with my work. From Howe, I learned how to write about abuse (and all emotionally-packed subject matter) through a removed and experienced speaker, as an adult looking back on the child.

In my poem "Exposition," my speaker tells of her earliest knowledge of sex:

there was a storybook between my legs I knew
only a boy could read. I pulled one in
the closet of the playroom and asked him to see, to lick
each one of my six-year-old teeth, his tongue a metal shock
like a fat copper fish. I pulled the little boy over me like
a sun, like a god, made him lash me with rope
to the swingset pole, practiced for my future

Like Howe, my speaker finds shards of understanding in her childhood. Even though an adult point of view doesn't intrude upon this poem, it is told through a lens of experience. "I was sexual before I was abused," this poem says, insinuating the adult perspective looking back on herself and searching for reasons she was molested.

Louise Glück

Her thirteenth poetry collection, *Averno* carries allusion in its title. Glück's mythical lyric poetry uses myths as probes for thought instead of consolations. Death and abandonment pervade. I was especially interested in Glück's excellent persona poems and her experiments with the character of Persephone—specifically, Persephone as a young girl recently forsaken by her mother and abducted by the male Hades. I hoped to mimic her seamless and layered allusions

to mythologies that connect present female trauma to our human legacy.

Tugging on the same thread as Glück with Persephone, I used fairytale allusions to get at my speaker's relationship with her mother. Like Glück, I found more freedom to explore emotional truth instead of strictly factual truth when working with allusion. In this excerpt from "Stepfather as Wolf," the speaker is recast as Little Red Riding Hood, but the subject of the poem is her mother:

When he prowled into the yard, flattened
the baby's breath, the mother was fed up with kneading
dough to live. A daughter to raise
was a body too many—she never asked
to be a widow, to sleep with a baby instead of a man,
to watch a girl full of yeast rise as her own breasts gave
to crumbs in her own hands.

The speaker is uniquely able to explore her mother's perspective through projection onto the cast of the well-known fairytale. Another fairytale poem is titled "Three Little Sisters." Playing on the story of the three little pigs, the speaker substitutes herself and her sisters for the pigs in a depraved twist. If the emotional truth of my speaker is that her mother is dead to her, the first stanza gets to that truth very quickly:

The three little pigs were daughters
whose mother ran out of slop.
She gave them each other, crawled
into the wolf, and died.

Forms

While the majority of my poems are narrative-driven, my collection also contains some formal and experimental forms. Included are a pantoum, a blackout poem, and a prose poem. I

chose to experiment with different poetic forms to add texture and varying meter to my collection, as well as to release steam by varying the emotional distances within poems. Poems “Dissonance,” “Can This Marriage Be Avoided?,” and “Domesticated” also differ from others in my collection due to a shift in subjects. Instead of narratively focusing on her own experience, my speaker writes about those around her. In the case of the blackout poem, “Can This Marriage Be Avoided?,” my speaker is reaching for herself and her mother at the same time as she writes to all marriages.

While writing my thesis, I too needed a break from the narrative poems as a writer. To gain a better understanding of formal poetry, I read *The Practice of Poetry* by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell, *The Prosody Handbook: A Guide to Poetic Form* by Robert Beum and Karl Shapiro, *Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry* by Louise Glück, *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft* by Tony Hoagland, and *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* by Robert Pinsky. As my study of the formal craft of poetry deepened, my understanding of the written word has evolved. Paradoxically, I have found greater freedom in expression when I discipline myself concerning form and structure. By seeking out the bones of craft, my poems unlocked themselves into deeper meaning. Practicing formal poetry heightened my awareness of choice even in my free-verse poems, highlighting word choice and line shape.

Another form I experimented with was the nursery rhyme, both sonically as well as with literary allusions. In her essay “Against Sincerity,” Louise Glück writes, “The artist’s task... involves the transformation of the actual to the true” (33). In order to reach the belly of truth in instances of childhood abuse, I used the nursery rhyme model to transform the actual. Allusions to children’s stories allowed me to highlight the foundational differences in my speaker’s background that influence the way she operates as an adult. In my poem, “Stepfather as Wolf,”

my speaker takes on the role of Little Red Riding Hood to convey the emotional truth of the predatory nature of her relationship with her stepfather:

When he prowled into the yard, flattened
the baby's breath, the mother was fed up with kneading
dough to live. A daughter to raise
was a body too many—she never asked
to be a widow, to sleep with a baby instead of a man,
to watch a girl full of yeast rise as her own breasts gave
to crumbs in her own hands.

The mother flung door and apron wide
for his thick animal scent. With his teeth inside
her, she forgot she was a mother, became only flesh,
young between his molars, the entree instead of the dead
baker's wife. At night she'd rub Wolf's furred shoulders as he slept
on her good goose pillows, run her fingers from the base
of his snout to the wiry tip of his tail.

Inside his mouth she forgave
the bruises on her daughter's thigh, the spot
behind her daughter's ear that each morning glistened
with canine spit:

if her child hid the fresh bread of her body in thick red cloaks
if his breath reeked of young meat
if he chewed her fast enough

the mother's mind went flour-white: spat.

The use of allusion also allowed my speaker to get at her relationship with her mother in an emotionally true, if not factual, way. My speaker clearly feels conflicted over the role of her mother, as she is subconsciously avoided in the narrative poems; the only narrative poem that features the mother is "Harvest," and even there the mother is kept to a single line and veiled behind a metaphor that equates the mother with deer (another prey animal). By implementing the cover of the fairy tale, removing narrative truths and doubts, my speaker finds the freedom to question the extent of her mother's complicity.

Conclusion

Louise Glück wrote, “the actual making of art is a revenge on circumstance” (25). The risk, she goes on, is in the possibility of shame. Writing poetry then becomes an act of courage, purchased with sacrifice or loss. “Courage, in this usage, alludes to a capacity for facing down the dark forces” (24).

In this spirit, I consider my thesis a work of triumph. Each poem is an action against pain, confusion, and inertia. Each poem is a record of my truth, and every word breaks my silence. If this work has been a battle with my “dark forces,” the past two years of writing have taken courage. Steeped in autobiographical reality, my speaker does for me what I cannot do for myself and takes authority over her past. While there is circumstantial danger and fear, speaking up through the written word has been an act of self-love.

There is no narrative conclusion at the end of my thesis, but there is hope. My speaker has excavated her inner child and bared her most intimate parts in poetry. By attempting to exorcise her stepfather to make room for her husband, she found the potential for fierce love in her sibling relationships. In reaching for them, my speaker reaches for herself instead of another man.

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