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THE BODY SEEKING MAGNIFICENCE

by

Taylor Franson Thiel

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

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2023

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ABSTRACT

The Body Seeking Magnificence

by

Taylor Franson Thiel, Master of Science in English

Utah State University, 2023

Major Professor: Michael Sowder
Department: English

This thesis focuses on how my time as a college athlete, my relationship with my mother, and my experience of an abusive relationship have intersected to impact my personal relationship with my body as I have fluctuated between trying to make it perfect, trying to ruin it, and trying to love it. The collection of poems examines how these forces collided in various ways to change how I thought about myself and my identity. After dealing with the idealized version of what a college athlete should look like and act like, inherited trauma from a mother, and trauma from a boyfriend, I developed eating disorders and a conflicted relationship with my body. All together, these poems show the evolution of my development from someone who did not understand why they could not love their body, to someone who could see how each moment of their life added up to teach them not to.

(90 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The Body Seeking Magnificence

Taylor Franson Thiel

This thesis focuses on how my time as a college athlete, my relationship with my mother, and my experience of an abusive relationship have intersected to impact my personal relationship with my body as I have fluctuated between trying to make it perfect, trying to ruin it, and trying to love it. The collection of poems examines how these forces collided in various ways to change how I thought about myself and my identity. After dealing with the idealized version of what a college athlete should look like and act like, inherited trauma from a mother, and trauma from a boyfriend, I developed eating disorders and a conflicted relationship with my body. All together, these poems show the evolution of my development from someone who did not understand why they could not love their body, to someone who could see how each moment of their life added up to teach them not to.

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I give special thanks to my husband for teaching me to see myself through the eyes of someone who loves me unconditionally. Something I could not always do for myself.

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To my father and brother, for being the most wonderful and wholesome examples of what being a “real man” really looks like. Because of them I know how to laugh at myself and not take myself so seriously even when things are hard.

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Taylor Franson Thiel

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I was a freshman in college. The beginning of my time as a Division One basketball player at Utah State University. The beginning of a relationship that would turn sexually abusive. The beginning of an eating disorder influenced by a mother with a complicated relationship to food and her body.

It was the Mountain West Tournament. The coaches had roomed me with a senior player on the team whom I looked up to more than I had ever looked up to another person outside of my family. She had my dream body. I didn't even realize I had a dream body before I met her.

She was lying on the white hotel bed in white spandex and a white sports bra. I stared at her, hoping she wouldn't notice. For the first time, I really began to think about how I wanted my body to look. How I could get it to be what I wanted it to be. You could see the muscles in her legs move. Her abs were faintly defined, feminine but still apparent. I knew then that I wanted to change my body.

Getting up from my own bed, I walked into the bathroom. My mother was, is, a nutritionist. Facing the mirror, I snapped a photo of my side profile. Stomach sticking out. I sent her the photo and asked, "Does it look like I'm getting fat, mom?" She responded, "No, not at all." I did not believe her. "But if I wanted to lose some weight, how could I? Would you do a macros plan for me?"

"Yes, of course, I can do that for you."

A macros plan is a way of counting the calories a person consumes, while also tracking protein, fat, and carbohydrates. My plan was as follows: 1800 calories, made up of 150 grams of protein, 60 grams of fat, and 270 carbs. I followed this for two years. In the first three months, I lost 20 lbs. and for the first time in my life, I could see my ribcage. I started doing extra workouts, got a Fitbit so I could see how many calories I burned per day. If the number wasn't high enough, the next day I would go even harder, longer.

That's how it started.

Female college athletes are by definition: elite. They train hours longer than anyone else. They are fierce. They are hard. They are always ready to do just one more rep. I was all these things, and I hated it. Never fully able to reconcile the toughness of my body and the softness of my soul, I struggled against the constraints of college athletics. I was asked by coaches to be aggressive when I was not, to care more than I did, and to ignore my body's natural warning signs even when it was screaming loudest. In my poem "A Prayer," I write a plea:

Grant me meekness
Succor me so I may yield to softness.
Take this chainmail muscle,
Rage stacked on rage,
Building a facade of strength,
Take it. Replace my hardened heart.

This is an expression of the way being a college athlete made me feel. I wanted to be a gentle person, but I wasn't allowed to be.

Despite struggling against these constraints, I also began to develop Orthorexia, an eating disorder associated with overtraining. While I hated how hard I had become, I also didn't want to fail. So, I began spending extra time in the gym, then more time. At one point I was training for close to 8 hours a day, 6 days a week, and the days I took off made me feel guilty, like I was failing to take opportunities to get better. I believe this compulsive relentlessness has also found its way into my poetry, as I attempt to show that I will work harder than anyone else at everything I do.

At the start of my freshman year, I began to date. Girl meets boy. Girl falls in love with boy. Boy leaves for two years to teach his religion in another country. Boy comes back angry with the world and takes it out on girl. If I wanted him to love me again, I'd send him nudes. He accused me of cheating on him when I did send the pictures because if I sent them to him, he assumed I had sent them to other people. Once, he brought me to a hotel room and tried to choke me, saying I was his naughty girl. All I wanted to do was breath, but with him I suffocated under the weight of the expectations of his fantasies.

When he abused me, I tried to comfort him. When he wanted me to send pictures of my body, I did. I'm ashamed about how happy it made me when he commented on how good my body looked. At this point I had gotten control over the extreme dieting and my extreme binging I had started when I decided I wanted to lose weight. I would restrict my calories to sub 1800 then binge when my body demanded more. The year before he got home from his ecclesiastical

mission, I worked hard in therapy to avoid repeating these patterns. To begin healing my relationship with food.

When he dumped me, I relapsed back into my eating disorder.

This of course found its way into my poetry as I tried to understand how abuse had changed how I experienced my own body. In “Rip Off Your Wings,” I write:

He takes his knife
 Claims he could never love anyone more than he loves you
 And he removes your wings
 To have and to keep as his own
 All he is
 Is hungry

My mother didn't mean to, but she taught me that working out makes me more valuable. When I asked her how to lose weight, she taught me. Every time I updated her on my updated weight, getting lower and lower, she would say *great job!*

In my poem “A Nuclear Family,” I write about the environment curated in my home:

my uranium mother keeping all of us in check
 in streets too small for her giants.
 her home, a home of order.
 fragile and volatile and entirely unreasonable next to
 a steely father, comfortable
 as a metal casing—holding in,

Being disciplined and in control was a sign of strength. When I was like her, and not enough like her, I felt like I was failing. She didn't teach me this on purpose necessarily, but I learned it and taught it to myself based on how the

world treated her and how I wanted to be treated by the world. People loved her because of how she looked, and all I wanted to be was loved.

This collection seeks to examine the intersections between the trifecta of my mother, my athletic career, and my abuser. It often focuses on subjects of ambition and overtraining as I have struggled with both as an athlete and a writer. I also understand the desire to be more than a body that was abused. Often, I wish for a mother who had promoted body positivity rather than one who taught me how to count calories religiously. But at the end of the day and through my writing I have discovered how important my feminine identity is in healing the trauma I have endured. Writing has been the first step.

CHAPTER II

INFLUENCES

As I strove to become the writer I know I am capable of becoming, I looked to poetic influences to guide my progression. I knew that for most of my life outside influences had told me who to be and how to write, but who did I want to be and how did I want to write?

There were four female poets who came to the forefront with writing styles that I wanted to emulate. I wanted to be angry in my poetry, I knew that I loved symbolist poetry, I knew that I needed to be better at focusing on sounds and that I wanted to improve at using narrative threads in my poetry. More than anything, I wanted to see how I could use my unique experiences as a woman to drive my poetry to be better and more resonant. These four female poets became the models for me on how I could use all those skills to become a great poet and writer.

These four women are: Mary Oliver, while primarily known as a nature poet, has a lesser-known vein of poetry that focuses on ambition. Oliver writes in accessible language and hints at deeper meanings with simple diction. Sarah Kay implores mothers to teach their daughters to love their bodies. She explores powerful themes, focusing on sounds and rhythm. Ada Limón ruminates on the image of the female body and men's desire to have power over it. Her settings and images are poignant while simple. Sylvia Plath, who was one of the first women to be openly angry in their poetry, taught me how to be angry in my poetry. Plath's voice and tone astonish.

Mary Oliver

Mary Oliver's poetry often rings out in notes of peace and tranquility. Born in 1935, her poetry often focuses on nature, but always touches on deeper subjects. One of those subjects is ambition, and how she has fought against it. In her poem "Black Oak" she writes:

Listen, says ambition, nervously shifting her weight from
one boot to another—why don't you get going?

For there I am, in the mossy shadows, under the trees.

And to tell the truth I don't want to let go of the wrists
of idleness, I don't want to sell my life for money,
I don't even want to come in out of the rain. (253).

Oliver's voice is consistent and contemplative. Oftentimes her poetry is deemed ecstatic, but it has moments of narrative and lyric as well. There's a reason she won a Pulitzer Prize. From her, I have learned how to add simplicity and elegance to my writings on my own wrestles with ambition. She demonstrates that elegance in her poem "There is a Place Beyond Ambition".

She writes:

When the flute players
couldn't think of what to say next

they laid down their pipes
then they lay down themselves
beside the river

and just listened.

It is no secret that Mary Oliver is heralded as one of the greatest poets (sans a gender descriptor) to ever pick up a pen. In her collection *Devotions* she

touches on perhaps a past life where she didn't focus as much on nature, but on drive, and success.

I have dreamed
of accomplishment.
I have fed
ambition
I have traded
nights of sleep
for a length of work (103).

I understand this sentiment in my bones. My own work seeks to exhibit these feelings as well. I too have fed ambition and lost sleep over it. I write poems about my orthorexia, how my ambition drove me to be cruel to my body. Although most of her themes are different from my own, this is one area in which we have intersected.

While I grappled with my own ambition and drive, I attempted to learn from Oliver how to take simple phrases and make them resonant. The ability to take basic words and make them powerful is something Oliver's poetry consistently achieves. I don't want to have to force overly dramatic prose or style on my writing. Simplicity and elegance, two things I have struggled with as an athlete, are two things I want to show through in my writing.

For example, in my poem "Stay Standing," I write:

I'm not sure what God is saying anymore
All I know is peanut butter has too many calories
And I miss it

Using simple language, I express complicated feelings in three short lines. The idea that peanut butter has too many calories, as well as the fact that for a very long time I didn't know who to listen to when it came to how I viewed the

world. I sure as hell wasn't listening to myself.

In tandem with straightforward and honest language, I also appreciate how Oliver utilizes narrative and stories in her poetry. For example, she often writes about walks she takes, telling us the story of what she observed on a walk.

In Oliver's poem, "Lead," she writes:

This winter
the loons came to our harbor
and died, one by one,
of nothing we could see
...
I tell you this
to break your heart (147).

In this poem, she uses narrative to discuss how delicate life is and how easily it can be snuffed out. She also admits to using narrative to try and break the hearts of her readers.

Employing this, in "Orthorexia," I tell a story about a day waking up to go lift weights. About how I pray the metal bar can lift the weakness out of my body so I can achieve perfection.

Another day of waking up not-perfect.
Sliding the brass knuckles on
So I can beat myself up for
Wanting to be stronger.
It is not blood
Flowing through my veins.
It is a weakness.
So I go to the gym
The only kind of self-harm
People congratulate you for.

My story is likewise told in an attempt to break the reader's heart. From Oliver, I learned that language doesn't need to be complicated to express

complicated ideas. And that telling a story is an impactful way to get readers to feel what we want them to feel, even if the feeling is breaking.

Sarah Kay

The words of Sarah Kay, a spoken word poet, are just as powerful as words in ink. She is the co-founder of Project V.O.I.C.E and participates in national slam poetry contests (Kay, "About Sarah Kay"). As a "slam" or dramatic poet, she utilizes sounds, rhythm, rhyming and images to move readers and listeners. Many of her poems touch on themes relevant to my work such as mother daughter relations and the female body. In one of Kay's collections, *No Matter the Wreckage*, she writes.

You are a woman. Skin and bones. Vein and nerves. Hair and sweat.

You are not made of metaphors. Not apologies. Not excuses (129).

Touching on similar themes, I examine what my female body means in relation to what I've endured. In, "Female College Athlete," I write (albeit using a metaphor):

If Death were a woman
Most days she'd look like me.

I express the way being a woman interacts with being a college athlete, when for me, those two things felt at odds. I'm arguing nothing is stronger, or more forceful than death, just as nothing is stronger or more forceful than a female athlete asked to perform. As a woman, I wanted to be able to choose to be soft, but as an athlete I was told not to be.

Another area we overlap in thematically is the relationship between mothers and daughters. Kay writes about what she wishes to teach her hypothetical daughter. In “B (If I Should Have a Daughter),” one of her more well-known poems, she imagines lessons that she would want to impart on her daughter. She writes:

And when they finally hand you a heartache,
when they slip war and hatred under your door and offer you
handouts on street corners
of cynicism and defeat, you tell them that
they
really ought to meet your mother (Kay, “B”).

I also wanted to write poetry about how “you really ought to meet my mother” because there are parts of my mother I am incredibly proud of.

Kay writes,

And she’s going to learn that this life will hit you,
hard,
in the face,
wait for you to get back up, just so it can kick you in the stomach
(Kay, “B”).

as she writes to her hypothetical daughter. I too feel like I have a mother who taught me these things and I examine the influence my mother had on the way I viewed my body.

In “Out of Her Rib,” I write:

I remember being three or four
And seeing my mother’s naked body
As she rubbed scent free lotion
Up and only up her still-smooth neck.
Staring at her as she stared at her.
The reflection, proof that
For some women, skin can snap back
After having a second child.
She had veins in places I would learn

Most women don't have veins.
She had muscles that made strangers
Feel like they could comment
On her body
Being strong
Made it public property.

Poetry is a place to examine the ways mothers teach us how to think about our own bodies. I watched the way my mother interacted with her body as well as the way the world interacted with it, and this directly impacted how I viewed my own. I explore this dynamic through metaphor and imagery.

For example, in my poem, "A List of Things That Happen to a Body," I touch on the subject of my mother and the beginnings of my eating disorder. I segmented the writing to represent how step by step someone can delve into disordered eating. When I say, "And the rib that her body came out of / Responded" I draw upon the religious iconography of Eve, our first mother, and reference a specific moment in time where I decided to eat less and my mother taught me how.

As women who both write about mothers and the female body, Sarah Kay's themes resonate with my own. From her, I have tried to learn how to express innate sentiments in a strong and reflective voice.

Ada Limón

Very few poets have caused me to search for every poem they have ever written to devour them. Ada Limón is one such author. I own more of her books than any other poet, and for good reason. Limón was to be chosen as the 2022 Poet Laureate for the United States (Limón, "Poet Laureate").

As a narrative and lyric poet, she is very present and honest in her writing. Meaning, as you read her works, you can feel her next to you, speaking directly to you through her poetry. Her settings become characters in and of themselves. Of all her skills, the one I have most tried to emulate is her ability to be both gentle and also forceful.

I've often been told my own writing is very "present," and honest as well. In each and every word I create a voice that feels present, alive, immediate. I believe this is something I have picked up from Limón. In *The Hurting Kind* she writes:

We have never been exiled
 We have been in the sun,

 strong and between sleep,
 no hot gates, no hour decayed,

 just the bottlebrush alive
 on all sides with want (32).

The physical sensation of being in the sun, surrounded by want, is a visceral sensation often found in her writing. Her voice is immediately present. In my own writing, I utilize this strength. In "Titan," I write:

I know I dreamed last night.
 I woke up with my hands on my neck,
 trying to choke the darkness out.

 I'm 21 and I go to bed each night
 and promise to be silent the next day.

In this poem, I try to create a voice that feels immediate, visceral, and vulnerable. We see this both in the frequent use of the "I" pronoun as well as the physical descriptions. The vulnerability comes from the admission that I am

insecure about how often and loudly I speak, hence promising to be more silent each night. While I have worked on this skill, I learn the balance of doing this well from Limón.

In tandem with the use of honesty, as a narrative poet, Limón tells stories or describes scenes. In her poem “How We See Each Other,” from *The Hurting Kind* she writes:

A group of us, to tune out grief every week, are watching
dance movies. Five women watching people leap and grind.

I am the first to break into tears. Something about the body
moving freely, someone lifting it or just the body

alone in the movement, safe in the black expanse of stage. The
body
as rebellion, as defiance, as immune (57).

Limón is telling a story about female friendship, healing from trauma, how the body can inspire us. Telling a story effectively in poetry is something I have always struggled with. Studying Limón has helped me. In my poem *A Hero's Journey*, I tell this story:

She was seven when,
Wrapped in an audience cheering on a hero
She decided she wanted to be a hero too.
Wanted to ball, wanted to score.
As his name soared above awe struck fans,
She pretended it was her name rising,
Her body aloft
On shoulders of praise and reverence.
Her legend being chiseled
In record and memory.
The dream refused to leave her
And she decided.
Then she learned
Not everyone gets to be a hero.

In this poem I play on the Hero's journey and describe my own journey of deciding to pursue college athletics and the resulting frustration I felt. Telling my own narrative. This is something I tried to emulate after reading Limón's work as I write about the things that matter the most to the story of my relationship with my identity and body.

As seen from the Limón poem above, Limón and I also intersect with the themes we write about. Above she is talking about the kind of body I write about. In the titular poem of *The Hurting Kind*, she talks about what we inherit from our ancestors, which I also write about. For example, she writes:

What is lineage,
if not a gold thread of pride and guilt? *She did what?*

Once, when I thought I had decided not to have children,
a woman said, *But who are you to kill our own bloodline?*

I told my friend D that, and she said, *What if you want to kill
your own bloodline, like it's your job?*

In the myth of La Llorona, she drowns her children
to destroy her cheating husband. But maybe she was just tired.

(80).

In my own poem "In Her Image," I touch on things I feel I did not inherit from my mother.

It isn't enough to make me her,
To make me something strangers
Want to talk about.
She might be my mother,
Might have borne me
But she did not make me in her image.

Discussing what we do and don't inherit from our parents is a theme I have frequently written about.

Because we connect thematically, I immersed myself in her work. Which led me to continue to examine the skills she uses and how I can use those skills in my poetry. Through reading Limón's work, I have also attempted to imitate the way she combines sharp images with that theme. Being gentle and harsh is a skill that I try to practice both in my poetry and in my life. Ada Limón writes in *The Hurting Kind*

Mistral Writes: *I killed a woman in me: one I did not love.* But I do not want to kill that longing woman in me. I love her and I want her to go on longing (30).

Here she is both gentle and forceful. She references another author who writes about killing a woman inside her but contrasts that tone by bringing in the sentiment of longing.

My writing seems to me to be similarly voicing a deep longing. I want to go on longing for a better relationship with my body, mother, and athletics. My poems are a place where I understand better how desire and personal agency in me have changed who I am as a human being, and also a place where I can move forward from what has been into what will be.

That is why, in "imposter syndrome" I write:

the space between a body
and who the body wants to be
is painted piety in a framework
begging to be burned down
the bullet didn't choose to be a bullet
but that doesn't make it less deadly

In this poem, I contrast gentle sounds with harsh images. Being both soft and bold. The double LLs of *bullet* and the softness of *who* and *want* soften the

stark image of *piety begging to be burned down*. As I have mentioned, this dynamic is something I desire both for my poetry and for my life.

Limón has been the author I have spent the most time with as I was writing my thesis. Her voice seems strong and consistent, something I as an author am still trying to find. Although her poetry seems to flow from her effortlessly, but I know that it took work for her to make it seem so. She learned how to write using specific craft skills, which shows I can too. Learning from her, I've been better able to write about similar themes, while focusing on narrative poetry with appropriate diction.

Sylvia Plath

Though Sylvia Plath needs no introduction to poetry readers, known for her confessional poetry, she is a poet I am personally new to. Though many tie her and her work to her husband, I view him as secondary to the canonized powerhouse that is Sylvia Plath. It's clear why she won a Pulitzer once one spends time exploring the powerful images and tones achieved in her work.

After picking up a book of her collected works I discovered the immense variety of poetic strategies she employs, several of which I attempt to use in my own work.

One is her use of the rhetorical question. When I first began writing poetry, I used many rhetorical questions but was then told they weakened my poetry so I stopped using them. Plath however doesn't hesitate to use them. In her poem "Winter Landscape, with Rooks" she writes

What solace

Can be struck from rock to make heart's waste
 Grow green again? Who'd walk in this bleak place? (Plath and
 Hughes, 22).

After reading her collected works, I decided to reintroduce rhetorical questions into my writing, as they can be a powerful device to engage the reader as they seek to answer the questions within their own experience. It also allows me a moment to pause and consider how what I am writing exists within the world and not just on the page. In my poem *An Ode to Coaches* I write:

What type of person, defines success through
 Breaking noses, punishing bodies to the floor,
 Cutting cheeks and foreheads open without guilt?
 I am now the body of that person.
 Have I always been this way?

I think these rhetorical questions were powerful for both me as a writer to examine but would likewise be powerful for readers who get a deeper look into my identity and personhood as well as hopefully their own.

A second and third technique I noticed Plath using is when she uses the we/our pronouns when in reference to her and her body, as well as her bodily descriptions. She writes almost as if she and her body are separate beings. She employs stark images to describe the body that most wouldn't have considered.

In "Tale of a Tub," she writes:

Each day demands we create our whole world over,
 Disguising the constant horror in a coat
 Of many colored fictions; we mask our past
 In the green of Eden, pretend future's shining fruit
 Can sprout from the navel of this present waste.
 In this particular tub, two knees jut up
 Like icebergs, while minute brown hairs rise
 On arms and legs in a fringe of kelp; green soap
 Navigates the tidal slosh of seas
 Breaking on legendary peaches; in faith

We shall board our imagined ship and wildly sail
 Among sacred islands of the mad till death
 Shatters the fabulous stars and makes us real (Plath and Hughes,
 25).

I interpreted “we” as Plath observing her body almost from an outside perspective. The use of the distanced perspective “we” adds both objectivity and power to her writing as someone who observes this physical form rather than someone who experiences it. The first-person plural usage also brings in the reader in a less aggressive way that “you” might. This is an effective way to show the way women think about their bodies, especially how I think about mine. Within my own writing I examine how I have both observed the things that have happened to me and also have experienced those things and how those two perspectives differ and add meaning to a piece. In my poem *Two Bodies* I write:

We might never know what we look like
 when the mirror
 can no longer be trusted.
 We try to touch our face
 as we stare into our own eyes,
 and miss.

In this moment, I discuss how body dysmorphia has affected me. The line “and we miss” is indicative of my inability to see my body as it is. The first-person plural pronoun seems the most accurate to what I experience and the way this poem unfolds. We have more than one body and we are never sure which one will be facing us in the mirror.

Plath also depicts the body in fresh and highly physical ways. The knees become icebergs and the body becomes a boat in a sea trying to become real. This imagery deftly captures the lack of reality many women feel in their own

bodies after trauma. Her imagery also expresses the separateness of body part from body whole which I have felt myself through both abuse from a loved one and as a competitive athlete.

In my own writing, one of the primary goals is to curate images about the body that stun the reader. I attempt to do this in my poem “Forcing Myself to See My Naked Body”. The title alone was an attempt to shock, and at the same time offer a sentiment with which many women will resonate. I write:

Point out the coracobrachialis,
 how it is not strong enough.
 Begudge the serratus anterior for refusing to shrink,
 for flowing over bras and bulging out of shirts
 pleading with internal rectus abdominis
 to come out, reveal themselves

My goal in this poem was to incorporate a research thread about the medical names for body parts that would cause a reader to pause and google definitions in order to understand the image more. However, in the fourth line, I express a sentiment that many women understand and can relate to in the hopes that even if readers do not appreciate the complicated medical jargon and symbolism, they will still relate to my writing.

Plath is also known for contrasting tone and content. Which Plath exemplifies in her poem *Daddy*, which uses a nursery rhyme rhythm but is actually full of rage. She writes:

Daddy, I have had to kill you
 You died before I had time——
 ...
 If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
 The vampire who said he was you
 And drank my blood for a year,
 Seven years, if you want to know.

Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
 And the villagers never liked you.
 They are dancing and stamping on you.
 They always knew it was you.
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through (Plath and Hughes, 224)

You can feel the rage in these lines. She manages to contrast her father's fat black heart being stabbed through with a stake with a steady nursery rhyme rhythm. This contrast sets the reader on edge and they inherently feel something is *off* but might not be sure exactly what it is.

While I don't attempt to pair nursery rhymes with rage, I do attempt to contrast tone with images. In my poem *Bruises* I write about something violent in a tender way. I write:

They are purple-blue-red galaxies
 In the midst of freckled stars.
 It is a joy
 Discovering micro-heavens I didn't even know I had,
 Like finding life on new planets.
 Watching nebulae be born.
 So beautiful I almost forget
 It takes pain to form one,
 Almost.
 ...
 I almost crave them
 Proof that I am the center of something.
 I collect them like Hubble collects the cosmos,
 And am always a little sad when they start to fade.

Most people can understand how bruises are painfully acquired, and while it's true that they hurt, I wanted to express how beautiful they can be as well as how proud I was to have them as an athlete. So, in this poem I speak tenderly of them. Proof that I was tough, and battle born. I contrast and pair violence with pride.

Plath's poetry is angry. I think a lot of mine is too. From her I learned it's okay to describe my body starkly and vividly. It's okay, impressive even, to be able to contrast the violence I experienced as an athlete with the pride I felt at my ability to be tough in the face of violence. I remind myself that asking questions is powerful, and that it's okay to use my poetry to be curious and to inspire my readers to be curious as well.

These four women shifted the way I viewed my own poetry. They inspired me to push myself to places in my poetry I wasn't sure I could go. Oliver's simplicity of language, Kay's orality, voice and rhythms, Limón's storytelling, and Plath's anger. Through them, I have become a better poet, which I hope is clear as readers explore my works. These four women also show that female poets can use the things they have experienced as women to drive their literary career to success, which I also hope to emulate.

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