

UNDERSTANDING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA THROUGH POETRY

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## ABSTRACT

Childhood is vital to the development of an individual. It lays down the foundation for who a person becomes and influences the way they behave, react, and respond as an adult. When that period of time is marred by trauma however, it can leave lasting impacts that affect a variety of aspects, including mental health and memory. In my capstone project, I aim to explore how childhood trauma affects an individual, especially when there is memory loss or a blockage. Through writing a collection of poetry that is based around personal experiences and inspired by similar literature, I hope to attempt to answer this question using writing as a tool for coping and healing. Poetry books such as Eugenia Leigh's *Blood, Sparrows, and Sparrows*, Beth Bachmann's *Temper*, and Donika Kelly's *Bestiary* will serve as a basis for my own work, as well as a means into which I can enter into the ongoing conversation of childhood abuse and trauma in literature. By doing so, others may connect to it and take away what they need, or want, in order to help them cope with their own subconscious and/or conscious trauma through art.

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## *Introduction*

The collection of poems that follow are flickering images that still whisper. Their words  
are nothing but smoke reflections of a fractured psyche. The blank space  
is a rupture in time a gap of memory bridged by fleeting scenes of half reality.  
This isn't about my father. It's a child's cry smothered in the dark.  
This isn't about my father. It's the ringing of silence in the ear the buzzing in  
the mouth the fear of it escaping the unknowing and knowing.  
This isn't about my father.

## *Blueprints*

step over the threshold, the silver line where the carpet and concrete almost kiss. remember to take your shoes off. there is no going back. turn your body to the left. the living room is how you left it this morning – the tv is nothing but static, the couch is empty. walk forward until the carpet gives room for the tile and it presses itself against your feet.

you forgot to take off your shoes. look to your right. a hole the size of a man is outlined in white kitchen drywall. the darkness beyond beckons, two tattooed eyes peering from its backside. look away and go to your left instead.

walk to the back door. slide it open. step out onto the narrow concrete patio. the foldable chair in the corner supports the weight of a cigarette smoking man. the smoke curls up from his fingers and hides his face. it burns your eyes. turn away. go back inside.

turn right from the living room and run into the bathroom door. open it. the shower confronts you. shattered and swinging. look to the left and see the woman you think you want to be, bleeding. look to the right and see yourself, browned blood under the fingernails. browned blood on the walls. look below. there is nothing but glass and blood. it crunches under your shoes. don't look back up. there is nothing but glass. don't look up.

*dislocation I*

there was a knocking  
outside the makeshift bedroom  
with the white trimmed double wide doors,  
but i couldn't see who the knock belonged to  
through the drapes. i swiveled my neck  
around, peering at the man sitting in the rocking  
chair. the knocking came again. he shook his head,  
long brown curls whipping the air. my neck snapped  
back into place, making the stool i was sitting on  
rock.

*San Jose, California – May 10, 2000*

Her guts spill like orange  
juice on the operating floor –  
the pulp of intestines reeking  
a citrus tang  
that lathers the tongue  
while shell shocked at six months  
I was pulled from the womb.  
The room was silent, except  
for the slow slew from  
empty stomach and hushed  
whisperings of medical staff.

My father wasn't there  
the very first time my  
mom almost died,  
but he was the next.

*photographs*

hunch ed over an oval cigarette tray  
he flicks lighter fluid and sparks of red eyed  
white limbed flamed fire catch the frayed ends  
of a leg in ripped jeans but there is no sound -silent  
is that all too familiar scream the thud of a body  
grows quiet under the sizzle crack of burnt kodaks

*dislocation II*

they took my brother first.  
I don't know how, my eyes  
were trained on the box tv,  
sides squashed between the  
feet of my father.  
someone called to me –  
maybe my grandma, or  
maybe no one at all.

then, they came for me.  
he snarled and pressed his ankles  
deeper into my sides as if it  
were made of playdough.  
a sharp toenail sliced across my back  
while they struggled to get him to his feet.

the last moment i saw him  
he was walking across the lawn,  
silver handcuffs gleaming against bare, browned skin.  
i don't remember if he was yelling or not  
but the spit that flew from his mouth  
did not form an *i love you*  
so i whispered it into the clouds

*splinters*

i count the concrete cracks  
on the way to the laundromat,  
ignoring the bracelet of rope splinters  
around my wrist

## *Passing Moments*

1.  
the front door was locked so i sat, sandaled feet crossed, on the prickly doormat and played with a leaf stem.  
it spun around like a ballerina perched on a pointe shoe between my fingers, my palm the center stage. twirling and twirling until its single standing leg buckled, bent, and snapped.

i held back my tears.

2.  
a man stepped out of the apartment next to mine and invited me to play with his daughter while i waited for my own father to come back. we played with barbies until my father came crashing in. the open screen door shook with the weight of his fist and the deep vibrato of his voice. i was told never to go there again.

i was never allowed to go anywhere.

3.  
inside, the walls of the living room were smeared in thick, blue-painted sentences near the ceiling. I don't remember what they said. I don't know if they said anything at all.

4.  
a gaping hole the size of a man was outlined in white kitchen drywall. the darkness beyond makes it look jagged, nothing like a cleaned-up crime scene.

5.  
the punishment for a dirty room:  
we gathered up all of the toys strewn across the carpeted floor, and the ones mangled in the closet, marched single file to the dumpster in the parking lot, and tossed them in.

6.

months later, he gave me a drugstore stuffed animal –  
a white, furry kitten. I loved it  
and I still loved him,  
even after everything.

7.

i don't remember much  
of the violence,  
only the aftermath of the bloodshed,  
the bruising -

the shattered, shower door  
with the frame hinges still swinging,  
the glass,  
the green sweater delicately hugging the neck.

i remember the final time we talked.  
the happy birthday phone call  
three years after the last one.

that was the moment when the love  
stopped. or maybe it was in  
the passing moments in between.

*violence doesn't faze me*

the wall doesn't know how to take a punch.

the busted drywall gapes, all dark and open mouthed  
at the fist.

its jaw split wide open, lip flipping inwards  
sunken and half-chewed over splintered teeth.

the mullers are filled with debris –  
white dust and flakes of plastered skin.

it looks a lot like a peach, the soft flesh of my cheek.

violence doesn't faze me

not the way it's supposed to

*Self Portrait as a Razor*  
After Donika Kelly

To resist the pull of skin  
against sharpened tongue – dragging,  
dragging, and the long-dreaded rip –  
the thick drip down metallic  
throat like too burnt caramelized  
sugar.           To gag,           spit;  
it coats the upturned belly,  
open palms, the slits between  
eyelids while laying empty,  
exposed.

*collisions*

beneath my unbuckled  
body, flung forward  
and crumpled against  
the dashboard, the lurch  
of the car rests  
against the crescent moon blood  
smear rising at the edge  
of my right eye.

*green turtleneck*

there are days when i  
am that little girl again, tucked  
away in the alcove of his side  
and there are others when  
i am the woman swaddling  
handprint bruises in dyed-green  
lint and fuzz

*Blood Origins*

After Joy Harjo

You ask me what I am thinking as I sit  
with folded knees and a bowed head –  
not in prayer, but remembrance –  
of the way skin buckles  
under the weight of a fist.  
It doesn't cave or split  
like a too ripened grape.  
It molds to the contours  
of knuckles, as malleable as the clay  
we are made of. They say we will  
return to dust, be a soft blanket  
for the earth, but I hope  
it's to the universe with our  
sparkling evanescent souls.  
For now, I only belong to the hues  
in between dark purple and blue  
the comfort in a bruise  
that tells me the worst is over.

*Portland, Oregon – 2004*

The night outstretches through train  
windows, cupping the cold

against my cheek. I lean  
and press against the pane.

The woman in the green  
turtlenecked sweater rocks

a baby boy to sleep. Pacifier  
mimicking motion in the mouth.

In the fog of my breath  
on glass, apparitions appear:

dull, yellow teathed stars stuck  
to a popcorn ceiling roof,

the gushing of water  
inside the nostrils, stillness

below the surface of  
the tub, two

tattooed eyes peering  
from beneath its depths,

a madman with smoldering limbs  
and a milky, stardust brain.

They vanish with snot and  
cloth of my sleeve as I

settle in for  
a long sleep.



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