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Reflection: a dream

A visual exploration of sexual trauma and healing

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Reflection: a dream

A visual exploration of sexual trauma and healing

by

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Thesis

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to those in the world who are still trapped in the cycle of sexual and intimate violence. Send them love, send them light, and fight for them when you find them.

Abstract

Reflection: a dream

A visual exploration of sexual trauma and healing

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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Reflection: a dream is a creative project combining live performance, movement, photo stories and installation work to explore the images the subconscious brings up in processing and healing from sexual violence. This paper is focused on both the art and performative aspect of my thesis, and the neurological reality of complex trauma disorders stemming from sexual assault.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: A Beginning.....	8
Chapter 2: Deflection	11
Chapter 3: The Science Matters.....	13
Chapter 4: The Freeze	15
The Science: Immobilization	15
The Science: Numbness, Catatonia & Collapse	16
The Art: Ice and Glass	17
From the Script	17
From my thesis journal.....	20
Chapter 5: Layers of Fear	21
The Art: writing the script.....	21
The Science: Complex PTSD.....	24
The Science: Danger-seeking and Reckless Behavior	24
What's Current: Healing practice for fractured identity.....	25
Masochism and Trauma	25
Chapter 6: Speaking and Silence	26
The Science: Broca's Area and non-verbal trauma	26
Social Silence.....	27

Chapter 7: Dreams of a Sadist	28
From the Script -----	28
The Art: From my thesis journal -----	30
Chapter 8: Naming	31
Chapter 9: Reuniting the Exiles	33
Chapter 10: The Mess	35
Chapter 11: Cleanup (or Burial)	37
From the script-----	37
From my thesis journal-----	38
From my thesis journal-----	39
Appendix	41
Bibliography	42

Chapter 1: A Beginning

“Human life begins on the far side of despair”

-Orestes

For the performative aspect of my thesis work, I created a piece called *Reflection: a dream* (full script included in the appendix). This piece investigates the experience of post sexual trauma and the ways in which the subconscious mind can process real-life events through a surreal dreamscape. I was tempted to approach the making of *Reflection* from an impartial research standpoint, but in the end the project became deeply personal, and the story told is my own. Every survivor of sexual violence experiences recovery from that violence differently. At first, I doubted whether my own unique story had the power to reach and affect other survivors - or indeed, could have any relevance to them. I did not want to create a piece that was only for myself; I wanted to serve the greater community of survivors in search of connection, validation, and healing. In the end, I decided that telling my own story as truthfully as possible is the best way to encourage other survivors to believe their own experiences are real and valid - and to that end, this project became much more personal and based in my own lived experience, supplemented with research into the nature of complex PTSD, healing of identity, and embodied learning.

To speak of myself, I experienced intense detachment from my “old self” - from the person I had known myself to be before trauma. Given my secluded upbringing, I believed that my mind had remained childish, retained an extended naivete, that had left me vulnerable to the attacks of a world that had grown beyond what I could understand as a pre-teen. I divided myself from myself, thinking of that person of the past as “that child” - both idolizing and fearing her. *Idolizing*, in the sense that I tried every moment to re-awaken the natural passion, cheer and enthusiasm that child felt so easily. I wore her favorite colors feverishly, trying to remember why I loved them; I wore her mismatched socks for years after I had outgrown both the socks and the teenage aesthetic, as if somehow those vestiges of that child could save me from a present-day that was alternately emotionally unbearable and emotionally numb. On the other hand, I also feared that past image of myself. Feared, in the sense that I never could escape the idea that my inner child had let me down - she had allowed herself to be happy, happy-go-lucky, spontaneous, free of any form of emotional armor. Those same traits that I have and do idolize as the traits of true happiness, were the very traits that allowed her to be taken advantage of, beaten down, and in the end re-shaped by someone else’s volatile rage and malice.

At times, I turned my own body into a shrine for that child: short shorts, neon stripes, waist-length ponytails I could neither bring myself to cut off nor care for. At other times, my feeling for that “other,” that child, expressed itself through visceral fear. Visiting my childhood home, I often found myself running past the stairway, because her

bedroom had been on the far side and I feared to the point of a frantic heartbeat that if I looked up, I would find her there, watching me. My relationship with that exuberant ghost was a representation of my failure: she was a helpless child, and I let her be injured, I failed to protect her. On the other hand, did she not also fail me? Had she failed me by allowing herself to become me: armored, numb, closed off to new experiences of the world? That emotional cycle of hate and fear between the self I am and the yearned-for self I was repeated and fed off of itself, relating even to my irrational fear of mirrors in which I was certain I would find the ghost of my own child- trapped, or coming for me; the nightmare shifts its form, but never truly closes, never ends.

Throughout my attempts to process and rise above my experience of trauma, I largely went it alone. It took me a number of years to ever say the word “rape” out loud. It took me much longer to accept that word as a part of my identity - a truth that happened to me, not a secret to be whispered or confessed. The questions I raised for myself seemed to have no answer. How does one escape a cycle in which one’s own self is the enemy? Is there a true way to confront inner demons when you are so frightened that you believe them sentient, separate, something that can and will jump out of the dark when you expect it the least? Can these feelings be escaped, or are they here forever? Is the best hope I have of leading a functional life to bury these feelings and carry on, my inner child an ignored hallucination, a ghost of a ghost?

Ignoring these feelings didn’t help. Ignoring that child I feared in my own eyes did not make her disappear. All the willpower in the world did not offer me any advancement, any cure. nor did any of the positivity culture tags; not sleeping, not waking up, not “self-care,” not therapy. The only thing that seemed to offer any peace was my work in costume design. If I worked hard enough toward a goal that was completely separate from any of my experiences, if I tired myself out physically beyond what was sustainable, I found that I could experience two things: satisfaction in a result (that glow, at the successful opening of a show). That glow felt more like real happiness than anything else I could feel in all those years. Secondly, sleep. Real, deep, untroubled sleep; the sleep of a body too used up to fight. To translate that: Two months of tech (depending on the project), for one evening or afternoon or momentary flash of something like gladness, and one untroubled night.

While it worked as a temporary system, a hijack of sorts, that hyper focused work life was not sustainable. When I felt the beginnings of burn-out from when a show didn’t go well, or when I had raced myself out of the adrenaline of working too hard, all that was left was a barren gray rut. A whole ocean of nothing washing over me, a sense of drowning in a world that was moving while I was frozen in place. I watched the world from the outside; I had dreams of looking in at my friends and family surrounded by warm light, fireplaces, and laughter, but my self always remained outside, locked away in the cold. I dreamed of an undefinable happiness that always vanished when I looked directly at it. Things I wanted were slipping away just beyond the reach of my fingertips.

Satisfaction was impossible. None of these feelings had names or reasons. I did not think about rape every day. I lived in a daily cushion of depression, and all the work stress in the world could not jolt me back out of it. My fail-safe of overworking until I was too tired to think, had failed me. I was left to face the emotional condition I had spent my entire adult life trying to outrun.

I would be lying to say that I didn't embark on this project for myself. I did. I reached a point in my life where the status quo was unendurable and I saw few options for changing it - and I learned from my mother early in my life, that if you don't know what to do, do *something*. I offer this project not only in the spirit of self-aid and self-definition, but also in the hope that taking the plunge into personal discovery may yield results that can be meaningful and helpful to others. More and more we hear of sexual violence in the media, and yet in so many ways, we are an invisible demographic. Even Kolk's work, heavily used in my research, specifically speaks to the trauma of early childhood molestation and military duty, but does not once mention simple sexual assault - simple rape. I say simple, because the numbers tell us that between one in five and one in three women living in the United States of America has experienced some form of sexual assault. True numbers are unknown because of the huge gap between those who are attacked and those who are willing to report or document. The experience of sexual assault is so painfully common, so universal - and yet, in all of my research, I struggled to find well-reputed texts that addressed the issue I was so intent on addressing: what can we do? A whole future sprawls out before those of us who have survived this nature of attack, and an incalculable percent of us also face fear and confusion about what in the world to do with our own future. How do we exist in that future without existing in a constant state of either numbness or pain? Statistically, many turn to drug use, to sources of endorphins that are reliable such as recreational highs, dangerous work outs, sex addiction, or even (as I did), danger-seeking and thrill-seeking behavior. Anything to cause those chemical reactions in the body that *feel* like the happiness we remember, in the great land of "before."

The problem is, there's a now. There's a tomorrow. And those tomorrows, not just for me but for all of us, deserve more than living in the shadow of intimate trauma. More than the life-shattering trauma that was voluntarily inflicted by others who, by and large, live free of imprisonment and free of consequences. The question I have dedicated myself to exploring is this: what paths of healing are open to survivors of sexual trauma, and what, if anything, can artistic expression bring to us in the path toward healing, closure, and self-fulfillment? We talk about catharsis in theatre all the time, but more specifically, I am talking about relief and release. In this paper I will address a number of existing approaches, and apply them specifically to the context of sexual trauma and artistic expression. My commitment is to find paths of hope for those who are trapped in the cycle of past abuse, to search for outlets beyond traditional talk or drug therapy, and to speak toward ways in which the vital soul of the artist can overcome the helpless soul of the victim and bring us a release from the trauma of our past.

Within this paper, I will present the known neuroscience of trauma - that is, what trauma physically does to our minds and our system of perception. I will also discuss current avenues of treatment and how and why each is known to work. With this set of facts and observations laid out, I will embark on supporting my hypothesis that artistic expression, specifically through performance and theatre, may be a powerful tool in the arsenal of healing, based in the science of the way the mind works, as well as detailed reflection on my own work and experience. I am also interested in the psychological and neurological patterns of the subconscious and what can or may be processed through dreams and through our animal minds below the rational. I apply these principles to my own performance installation, *Reflection* - an exploration of the healing effect of performed images brought to light through dreamscapes and the subconscious. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I will discuss and analyze what I have learned through this process and how it may serve to guide future survivors on their personal path toward healing and emotional peace.

Chapter 2: Deflection

It's been brought to my attention more times than I can count that I am a deflative person, especially when it comes to this project. I don't *feel* deflative; I always feel as if I'm sharing everything that I can. But at the same time, I also always find myself trying to bury my own literal experiences under mountains of research, or under abstract images that can be interpreted in a number of ways. Even in making a project that is fundamentally about myself, I always find ways to make it about something else - so in this section, I am choosing to share a more literal account of my own life in the hope that it can better inform the rest of this essay and why I have approached my project in the ways that I have.

I was a gay child. Like, super gay. I had absolutely no interest in boys, and much to my dismay they seemed to always have an interest in me. I met my primary aggressor (referred to as DM; I will not name him here as, best believe, he did not sign an IRB) at a party (my mother always believing that her own children were "gifted and talented," I started high school when I was barely twelve years old; I was the youngest person at this party, so I suppose that made me an easy target). I was being pursued by another high school senior who kept cornering me when no one else was looking. DM's face looked friendly, so I bolted for him and took refuge behind him. At that moment, I didn't have a thought in my head besides escaping unwanted attention from someone who was much larger and more aggressive than me - unfortunately, I picked the wrong refuge. DM soon made it clear that the price for his protection was sex and obedience, and the penalty for not paying up was either harm to myself or harm to others.

Initially, it seemed that DM was intent on defending me - but his idea of "defense" was very different from mine. Getting between me and a big dude who was coming after me at a party was one thing, but within a few weeks Dimitri was driving by

that boy's house with a gun in the front seat, texting me about how he was going to "murder the bastard." I started receiving terrified phone calls from other students who had shown interest in me, asking me to stop him, but I had no idea how. A sophomore boy gave me a teddy bear for Valentine's day, and the bear was promptly returned to him by Dimitri - strung up in a locker by a noose around its neck, covered in blood.

I think that DM had a very intense but warped hero complex. He had this idea about defending me, and in doing so, he felt that something was owed to him. He had cast himself as the "white knight", and me as the damsel in distress, which has never been particularly to my taste. I had been dating a girl, who stopped speaking to me entirely; all of my friends were slowly threatened to stay away from me. I was a scholarship kid at a competitive (and wealthy) prep school, and I quickly found that going to the administration was not an option. They did not want to hear about "boyfriend problems" or "teenage squabbles." The head of the upper school earmarked me as a trouble student and made school counseling mandatory for me. I spent the three years I was in high school attending therapy sessions with an older male therapist who started every session with the question, "what's wrong with you this week?." I internalized that question deeply. Combined with my complete alienation of my friends, whom I was no longer allowed to associate with, I learned to believe completely that the problem was with me and only me.

The violence and sexual violence came on slowly. At first it was just being chastised for not "liking that" enough (I didn't like pretty much anything to do with men at the time), or for looking at another man, or for still having feelings for my ex girlfriend. It escalated to late night phone calls in which DM would talk at me for hours about everything I had done wrong, while practicing his "knife throwing skills" by launching knives at the wall in his room. "You didn't listen -" *thunk* "You don't care -" *thunk* "Real girlfriends don't do this -" *thunk*. I think, on the whole, I would have gotten off easier if I were easier to intimidate, but at that age I didn't know how to pretend to be afraid. I thought he was being an asshole, and I said so; he responded by throwing large rocks at his little sister until I apologized. His little sister, poor girl, blamed me for her injuries, and I began again to feel responsible for the pain that he chose to cause others.

As his drug problem got worse (he was and still is a heroin user, but alcohol and cocaine never helped his temper) his need to hurt others got worse, and his belief that I should be grateful to him intensified. He developed the idea that because I wasn't grateful enough, he wasn't a hero and if he couldn't be a hero, he must be a monster. Therefore he was going to be the worst monster anyone had ever seen.

His need seemed to be for complete control - what I ate, who I saw, when I slept. He would keep me up all night knowing that I had to be on the bus to school by six am. He forced me on threat of violence to do his homework for him, because he knew my grades were better. He would plug up my nose and choke me until I swallowed either pills or alcohol - without ever telling me what I was taking. Very often, it was a mix of uppers and downers that mixed very badly for me and left me vomiting or nauseous. He had an obsession with knives and blood; he would cut my arms to roll his cigarettes in the wounds, or cut my legs to use the blood as sexual lubricant. When I protested or cried,

he always told me that I was crazy or too sensitive; that no one loves high maintenance girls; that I was just crying for attention. I learned fairly quickly not to cry and not to protest. He seemed to enjoy when I was afraid or in pain, so often instead of having sex he would use objects such as the hilts of knives or the barrels of guns. I didn't dare tell anyone, including my own parents, because anyone that I approached about the situation was then also in danger.

I don't feel the need to detail every incident of violence that happened in those three years - for one thing, my memory can be somewhat shaky. I specifically remember my head slamming into a number of hard surfaces, including the dashboard of a car and a locker room door. I remember wearing long-sleeved shirts in the summer to hide knife and bite marks. I also vividly recall being found by a teacher with a small razor blade (required for the art class I was taking) when my sleeves were rolled up. She assumed that the marks on my arms were self-harm and told the administration; the administration already believed I was a "troubled child" and asked me to leave the school, only letting me return after I had spent a week in the local hospital teen psych ward. My family was devastated; my parents wanted to know what was wrong with me. I wonder all the time what might have been different if someone had asked, not "what's wrong with you?" but "who is hurting you?"

No one ever did.

I graduated from high school, and I left. Dimitri was enrolled at Gettysburg College (which he quickly failed out of and was shortly hospitalized a number of times for heroin overdoses). I took all my money and bought a ticket to Italy. I got off the plane and threw my cell phone in a fountain. When I finally came back to the US, I enrolled for my undergraduate degree at Earlham College, drove to Indiana, blocked everyone I had ever known on facebook so that no one could tell DM where I was, and tried my best to forget those three years of my life. Unfortunately for me, forgetting did not entirely work - so here, we have this work, which is my way of remembering.

Chapter 3: The Science Matters

Despite my undergraduate background in neurobiology and my lifelong personal research, I approached my research into the chemistry and physiology of trauma with personal fear - the fear, I have figured out, of somehow being rejected by science. The fear of the science proving that everything I had experienced truly was made up by me, all in my head - all the myths that our culture tells us. I feared that the authors with PhDs and the "real" knowledge could only confirm what the world had told me - that I was doing it wrong, living it wrong, that all the terror and sleeplessness, numbness and misery was in fact only a symptom of my own wrongness as a person, was somehow all my own fault.

In reality, however, digging into the contemporary research on the neurobiology of trauma was the most validating experience I have ever had. Within the first chapter of

Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, I had read about military veterans displaying symptoms identical to my own; statistics of others suffering in similar states of detachment, fear and anger; descriptions from patients so similar to my own feelings they could have been copy/pasted from my journal entries. All at once, I understood that I was living in a pattern dictated not by my own failure, but by the scientific ways in which the mind and body work in the wake of trauma. My experiences became not only real, but part of a larger picture. I began to feel intense camaraderie with war veterans thirty years my senior, with women given electroshock therapy in the eighties because of their "catatonia" induced by sexual trauma. In short, I developed a community from stories of other humans who fit into the same pattern, who were my people. Diving into my research began to make me feel real and alive and present, in ways that I rarely can, because the more I read the more I discovered a wealth of people like me - living behind panes of glass, staring at themselves through the detached lens of their memories. These experiences all come from a physiological base, from the mind's reaction to traumatic events.

I strongly believe that the greatest power of the abuser comes in isolation. I will never forget the words of one of my past sexual partners, when something we were up to had triggered a cascade of anxiety for me. I was shaking and apologizing, over and over, curling up to make my body as small as possible, and I remember her simply holding me, smoothing my hair. She said, "It's okay. I remember too. The nightmares come surging back, a lifetime's worth, and they're too big to keep inside but there's nowhere else to put them." That simple comfort, of feeling understood, has stayed with me all these years - we didn't speak for the rest of the night, but held each other and shared an almost ritualistic silence, a bond of grief for the people we used to be, the self we each had lost. Abuse relies on isolation; that night, for me, was the opposite of isolation. I was able to find kinship and trust with another survivor and experience a shared reality. Through the opposite of isolation, I found healing - and as a theatre artist, I realized, performance space is also the opposite of isolation. Every performance is an act of sharing, an act of community. I began to think that perhaps live theatre could be a powerful venue for healing.

Given the context of my belief that isolation is one of the most powerful tools of abuse and continued re-traumatization, I will dedicate the next section of my paper to examining some of the most common and pervasive symptoms of trauma survivors. Additionally, I will elaborate on some of the neurological and physical changes of a traumatized mind undergoes that causes these symptoms. I hope to provide context for these symptoms to others who may be suffering from them, and validation that these symptoms are not only real, physical, and scientifically understood - but that they can be confronted, and they can be healed.

Chapter 4: The Freeze

Have you ever been so afraid that you weren't even afraid anymore? It's that place right past fear, empty and echoing. That's where I've lived most of my adult life. I mention that I have anxiety, and people scoff - I don't act like it! But the truth is, I have two options: Being so shut down that I never say a word or dare go out my front door - or, go to that *frozen* place. Fear doesn't exist there because nothing exists there - and a whole lot of nothing might not be healthy in the long run, but it gets you through the day.

I did my very first script reading in front of a live audience - after all of that writing, pondering and rewriting, it was finally time to share. I observed my audience react, with sympathy and horror, and I wondered why? Why are the details of my life that are simply true, suddenly so touching and horrific? Why are the things that I have carried with me for so long suddenly such a mystery? How can my words touch this audience when I myself am floating far away, free from contact, free from injury? With some bitterness, I also remember thinking...where was this sympathy, support and love back when I actually needed it? back when my heart was still beating and my emotions still functioning? Back when I was really *here*, and not somewhere else. I could have used it then.

This is a state of dissociation, painfully common in trauma patients. Dissociation comes in many forms. The basic idea is that the mind is in so much pain that it can be only filtered at a slow pace - broken down into manageable chunks, digested. This is why many trauma patients only recover their full memories years after the fact, and some never recover their full memories at all. It took me a long time to accept that there are details of my life that I will never know. Dissociation is a coping mechanism, but taken too far it can be damaging and cut a patient off from connecting with the present.

THE SCIENCE: IMMOBILIZATION

The very first thing to understand about the condition now known as post-traumatic stress disorder is that those who have it are suffering from a neural system that has fundamentally reorganized itself to adapt for incessant danger. Part of the daily fact of being human is that we react to stressors - something occurs, and our body reacts with a combination of stress hormones and other signals that prepare us to deal with the situation. If we perceive that situation to be dangerous, that means preparing us for fight or flight - in other words, to put ourselves out of danger, either by confronting the danger and winning, or via escape.

It is also important to know that horrifying and dangerous experiences can occur without causing PTSD - or, can cause only a minor form of temporary post-stress that is not dangerous to our emotional or physical health long-term. PTSD is only diagnosed when severe symptoms persist for a month or longer. Studies and patient surveys now

show evidence that one of the major defining factors in whether or not a life-threatening experience causes PTSD is *immobilization*. Soldiers and firefighters, for example, can go through the exact same situation of danger, but only one individual of the group will develop PTSD. It is becoming clear that statistically, that one individual is more likely to have been held down or immobilized - by a fallen beam, debris, or immobilizing injury, for example - while their counterparts in the same situation were free to move and react.

In light of this statistic, is it any wonder that so many survivors of sexual assault develop PTSD? Whether through physical immobilization such as being held down, or coercive immobilization such as threats or manipulation tactics, nearly all survivors of sexual assault experience the feeling of *being* in danger without being able to *react* to that danger.

What is going on in the brain during moments of fear and danger? In the normal course of things, in a healthy mind, we perceive danger, react to danger with an influx of stress hormones and other physical signals, and once the situation of stress has passed, that influx of stress hormones goes back down and our mind is able to return to equilibrium and carry on with daily tasks. In situations of immobilization, however - danger that we cannot react to or interact with - those stress hormones surge, but cannot be acted upon. At this point in the process, our system fails; because we are unable to act while our internal signals are demanding that we act, those stress triggers continue to flood our minds. Beyond that, once the danger is over, the levels of stress signals in our bodies fail to restore. We become stuck in a physical loop of danger signals and begin to lose the ability to feel safe or understand the meaning of safety. Our bodies continue to believe we are under attack, and we carry the stress of attack with us daily - not merely because we are repeating our emotional experience of danger, but because our physiological and neurological response to danger is stuck on repeat and cannot level off.

This concept of immobilization combined with stress feedback loops is the foundation of understanding what is happening in the mind of trauma survivors and understanding the symptoms of PTSD. The individual experience, however, differs. Each trauma survivor may experience vastly different nuances in their symptoms. It is important to always, always keep in mind, however, the physiological basis for these symptoms - the mind is a creature of habit, an organ of repeated pathways, and it has learned that it is in danger. Many symptoms of PTSD can be traced back to the brain's effort to protect itself and shield the self from danger.

THE SCIENCE: NUMBNESS, CATATONIA & COLLAPSE

Shut-down is the mind's last resort - what our brain instinctively falls into when our reactions to fight or flight have not rescued us from danger. It's a neurophysical last resort - an emergency system only activated when our other options have failed us. This reaction is rooted in the dorsal vagal complex (DVC), part of our evolutionarily primitive "reptile brain." The state of collapse or shut-down is most often activated by physical or

emotional immobilization, such as being held down by an attacker, or in cases of childhood or domestic trauma, being dependent on an attacker for safety, caretaking, or continued quality of life. The DVC is part of our parasympathetic nervous system, which Kolk describes as “evolutionarily ancient” and deeply rooted in the basic ways that we function. This system controls symptoms such as nausea, a slowing of the heart rate, and shallow breathing. We become so unreactive to the danger we are in, that we become unreactive to everything else as well. The people around us, both loved ones and attackers, cease to matter; their needs and existence cease to register. Our own needs and existence ceases to register. Our awareness of ourselves and our surroundings shut down, and many victims experience the sensation of no longer existing, ceasing to be real, or feeling disembodied from ourselves. Some may even cease to register or feel physical pain. Many patients report out-of-body experiences in which they cease to be connected to their body or their sense of self at all. Similar to how being in shock can allow us to power through disabling injuries, this reaction is our brain’s way of allowing us to survive the unsurvivable - by cutting us off from our ability to experience it. While this survival tactic can be an appropriate reaction and help us through initial situations of danger, PTSD patients continue to experience this effect long after the danger is over - which affects their quality of life, their ability to engage with the world around them, and ultimately their sense of being alive.

THE ART: ICE AND GLASS

The truth is, for a dissociative trauma patient, there is only the thinnest of thin lines between being afraid of everything, and being afraid of nothing. I explored the feeling of dissociation through both script and photos, trusting my instincts as images came to my mind, even if those images didn’t make rational sense. What do victims of dissociation have in common? The motif of glass or windows, the feeling of being “outside” - elsewhere or nowhere. Glass and ice became a huge part of my internal landscape. They are things that separate you, shield you, yet are still treacherous because they might break. The feeling of constant longing to set your feet again on solid ground, but never knowing where the solid ground is or if it will hold your weight. I feel these things, and I see them reflected in case studies from both neurologists and psychologists studying the state of dissociation in trauma.

FROM THE SCRIPT:

*NEON. I dream I become the ice in the river.
I dream of a cold so fierce it stretches over me, numbs the life from me.
I dream of a cold so deep, that everything beyond it falls away.
A whiteness falls, and I am nothing.*

I am so safe, in my nothing. I become freshly fallen snow. I become a kind of purity, in my deep silence. I learn bliss. I recolor the essence of me with nothing - and funny thing, nothing looks a lot like beige walls. I buy art supplies, and paint nothing. I stand in the middle of a voice lesson, afraid to sing.



Figure 1: Model Zoe Andersen, photographer Lirit Olyan. For me, color has always represented life. The feeling of being alive exists in vividness, in deep rich tones, in neon and blood. This photo represents the gradual fade of the self, as abuse leeches color from us.

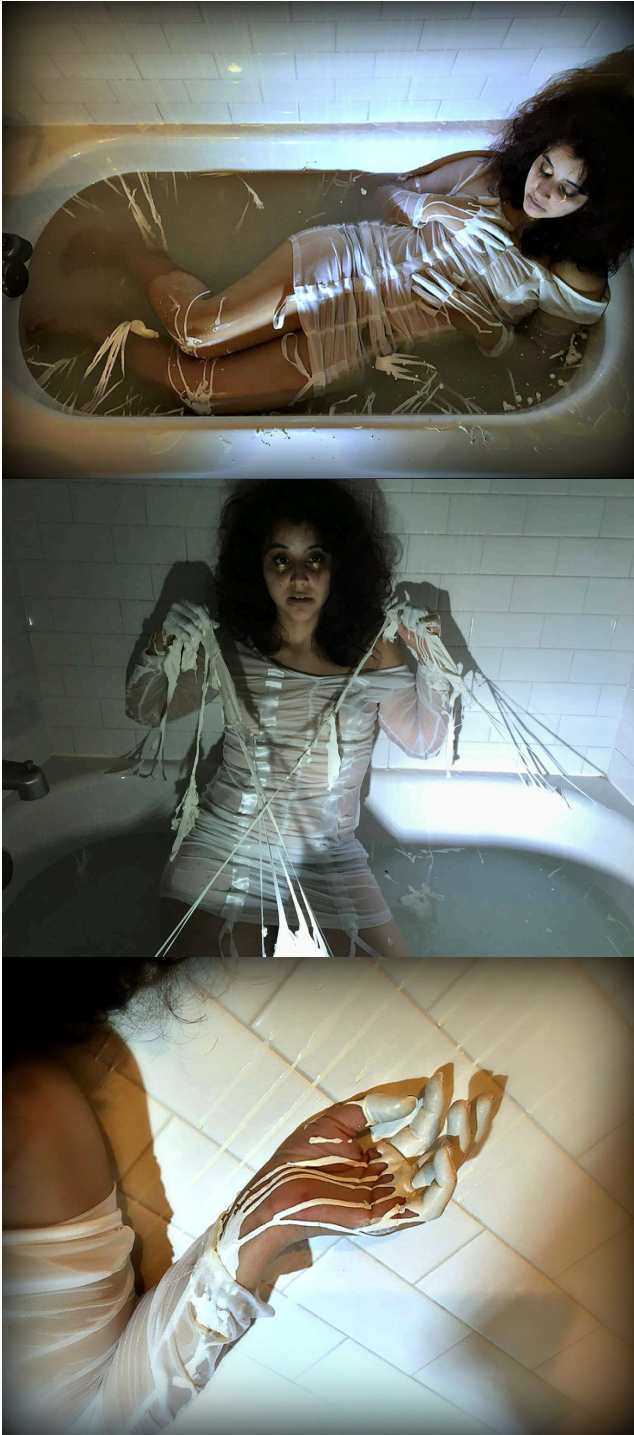


Figure 2-4: Model Roxy Mojica, photographer Lirit Olyan. I experience the recurring dream of floating in a space that is too small for me, surrounded by disembodied pieces of myself. This dream is strange because I am not really there; I am always watching myself from the outside. I have found peace in being outside of myself, but I am also afraid, because I know the peace is false and cannot last. Sometimes I can only see my own hands or eyes, and the rest of my body is missing – I have lost myself and I don't know where to look to recover what I have lost.

FROM MY THESIS JOURNAL

I dream that my mouth is sewn shut
My stars eliminated
I dream of jittery fingers still forever
Of color bleached

I dream of my body encased in clear tranquility
In iron solace
I dream that the pleasure places never were, that happiness is burned from my body
To give me freedom.
I dream of white skin and open eyes
I dream of a burial without loss or guilt
And a golden key that only I have access to

I dreams of an absolute stillness so cold it warms me

It sounds like death,
but
it is not my *death* I dream of.

I dream of a place where the rioting storm that burns me is still
A cacophony silenced
The suffocation forced on me...suddenly lifted

I dream of the death of this nightmare.
I dream of rising free.

Chapter 5h: Layers of Fear

“If we are going to be annihilated anyway, it is less humiliating to go out with a bang than a whimper”

(May, 23)

We can't live in a place of fear and tragedy all the time. We know scientifically that the effect of trauma can last for years, sometimes for an entire lifetime. On the other hand, human beings are too complex to simply exist in a state of *being traumatized* - and each survivor finds a way to go about their business, to continue their lives, despite the effects of trauma they may be struggling with internally.

In my experience, everything is layered. My surface area is typically the functional one. I meet my deadlines, I eat my meals, I walk through my days. I am always aware of the underlying layers - the predator, the victim, the child, the rage. This is a state of fractured identity that is now most often addressed through behavioral therapy and embodied healing.

THE ART: WRITING THE SCRIPT

How was I to express a reality in which more than one version of myself is always active? I chose to create a dreamscape in which I performed Neon, the primary speaker and the “front self” or dominant self. In Neon's world, however, there also exist her shadow-selves represented by movement artists and called The Exiles. The Exiles can be anything, from caretakers and allies to abusers and adversaries. The fundamental journey of a trauma victim toward healing and self-realization is not necessarily in confrontation with the abuser; more often, it is about confrontation with the self. Neon is alone in a world surrounded by pieces of herself that she must pull together into one organized whole.



Figure 5: In this production photo, Neon is shown at the end of a dance segment in which the Exiles have brought all of her anxiety to life. Here, the Exiles are antagonists reenacting abuse.



Figure 6: Model Zoe Andersen, photographer Lirit Olyan. I dream of a self divided. There is a smile that lives in the top layer, and I know that smile so well that most days it is almost real. The anger, the defiance, the grief – these are things it is harder to show people. I know them, but are they safe to reveal to the world around me?

THE SCIENCE: COMPLEX PTSD

Complex post traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) is a unique class of PTSD that develops as the result of repetitive, long-term trauma. While PTSD can develop as the result of an isolated event, C-PTSD differs in that it involves a distortion of the core identity of self. Long-term survival instincts are learned that apply in the situation of abuse, but are dangerous or damaging once that situation is escaped. Patients often divide themselves into “public” selves and “private” selves, and create distinct behavior patterns or personalities that they believe are the most likely to survive in a particular situation.

THE SCIENCE: RECKLESS BEHAVIOR AND DANGER SEEKING

Danger-seeking behavior is my own personal vice and coping mechanism, so I can speak to this section with all the authority of a veteran in the field. Glancing back at the previous symptom descriptions, there is a common thread: we numb ourselves to the unendurable, and in doing so we also numb ourselves to the good things in life, the things that life is not complete without. The ability to feel safe, the ability to feel happiness or reassurance in human contact, the ability to feel like part of a community, the ability to enjoy basics like hot food or warm showers - all of these things fade out as a necessary result of dividing ourselves from experiences we cannot process and cannot escape.

And yet, we are not made to feel nothing. We are not made to exist in an emotional and experiential void. Bereft of our ability to feel good things, and chronically fearing the re-experience of our worst moments, what is left to experience?

Case studies show lawyers with PTSD becoming so involved in particular litigation that they forget about food or sleep; deliberately avoiding sleep because chronic exhaustion can bring on a pseudo-euphoria. Many patients take up running or other sports that provide an influx of dopamine and adrenaline - things that feel like happiness, things we register as happiness, part of our internal reward system that tells us we are alive and have done something well. Again, though, patients with PTSD are compelled to take it too far - to follow the after-glow of a long run so desperately that their body suffers; to pursue a project so ceaselessly that basics like bank accounts, spouses, even children cease to matter. More patients still take up recreational highs - the synthetic feeling of euphoria gaining appeal because the mind can find comfort in nothing else.

Many combat veterans are compelled to return to the field. Statistically, many rape victims turn to violent forms of release such as (for some) BDSM and healthy forms of reenactment of their trauma, or (for others) seeking out new abusive scenarios as they gravitate toward the need to feel pain rather than feel nothing. Abuse victims show a high probability of becoming either masochists or sadists, and while some are able to keep these urges at a healthy degree, others are not.

Bungee-jumping, extreme sports, physical/sexual masochism, even small acts such as walking alone at night in a city - all have one thing in common: they make us *feel*. All of these things naturally cause fear reactions, or pain reactions, but because of our dopamine reward-system, after the fact, they begin to feel pleasurable. Over time,

that pleasure and reward sensation shifts so that we feel pleasure in the dangerous act itself, feel pleasure in the fear and pain.

Sometimes it's about control. Being able to reenact situations of fear and pain, and survive them, can cause a feeling of self control - reaffirm the knowledge that one is tough, that one can survive terrible situations. But even more fundamental in the drive toward danger is the need to combat numbness. We were not made to feel numb, and if the numbness persists too long, one begins to wonder - what's the point of remaining alive at all?

WHAT'S CURRENT: HEALING PRACTICE FOR FRACTURED IDENTITY

In contemporary practice, therapists often address fractured identity as a "family." Elements of the self have become detached from each other, and traumatized individuals often over-identify with one element of themselves (such as the "manager" who is in control of the situation) at the expense of other vital parts of themselves (such as the "child" who is useless to daily functioning because they feel too much pain or fear). Patients are encouraged to think of these identity pieces as a "family," each piece one part of a greater whole. Each piece of the self has its own desires and needs, and therapy often focuses on meeting the needs of the neglected self - confronting the fear of the child, overcoming the paralysis of the victim identity, and so on. The goal is that eventually all the pieces of the self can come together to support the greater whole - and again become allies to the individual, instead of enemies or exiles.

MASOCHISM AND TRAUMA

Sex-positivity activist Ariel Gray states, "we may find ourselves most truly in moments of pain - or we may lose ourselves. Masochism is the place where we rediscover the parts of ourselves we have lost, and we do this by burning the ephemera away." *Reflection: a dream* is a story that details some of the most intimately painful moments of my life - not all of them, certainly, but enough. Sharing that story publicly, and speaking those words myself, was a challenge that I honestly didn't know I was up for until I had already done it. As masochists, as danger-seekers, we enter into a contract with our own pain. To express it, to allow it, to give pain space - and in return to gain release. We gain an existence in which that pain has less power over us; we create a world where we have power over the pain.

Chapter 6: Speaking and Silence

*There's nothing of value in you that silence can save.
-Reflection: a dream*

Articulating my life experience into one comprehensive story seemed like an impossible task. For one thing, words often failed me. The visceral feelings that came to me when I thought about the project seemed to have no words that could truly describe them. Superlatives fell short, and words like “pain” seemed trite and overused. At the same time, I felt compelled - almost compulsively - to *find* the right words, to give voice to things that otherwise only existed inside me. When I couldn't describe the feeling, I described the experience; when I couldn't describe the experience, I turned to images to express what I had no way to verbalize.

THE SCIENCE: BROCA'S AREA AND NON-VERBAL TRAUMA

Broca's area is known to be in the frontal lobe of the dominant hemisphere of the brain (typically the left), that is linked directly to speech production and verbalization of experience. Current brain imaging shows us more: in a state of flashback or post-stress, Broca's area shuts down completely. The fear and emotion centers of the brain light up like Christmas trees, but the speech center goes dark.

We interpret this to mean that for many traumatic experiences, there are no apt words. Not only are the necessary words hard to find in and of themselves, but the pathways that allow us to form words about our experiences cease to function. Through both my script and photo stories, I tried to capture the feeling of screaming without words - the feeling of having *something* to say and no way to say it.





Figure 7-8: Models Iman Corbani & Hope Higgins, photographer Lirit Olyan. Figure 7 embodies the idea of screaming without voice, while figure 8 shows the feeling of being blocked by one's own biology into the trap of silence.

SOCIAL SILENCE

The silence of rape victims can also come from a place of social alienation. Many survivors have found healing in sharing their experiences verbally, but only if they have a safe space in which to do so. The world in general is not such a safe space. It is hard to share an experience that you know may shock or injure the people around you. What if you trigger someone else? What if word that you talked about it gets back to your abuser? What if your friends and family find you needy or weak because of your experience? Because of the intimacy of the violence in question, these types of fears can be thrown out of proportion and seem huge. I think it is important for performance makers focused on activism and awareness to concentrate on creating safe spaces where the unspeakable can be spoken.

Chapter 7: Dreams of a Sadist

I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.
-Millay

The idea of complex post traumatic stress disorder tells us there are many forms of trauma, and that instantaneous trauma can manifest differently than trauma formed over time. My story is explicitly about the trauma of a deliberately sadistic human, who caused pain and disorientation for his own gratification. This is not accidental trauma; it was planned and placed, created, just for me.

I have put a lot of thought into forgiveness over the years. It was easy to think that, in order to heal myself, I would need to forgive my abuser and let my anger go. Perhaps that does work for some people, but I do not think it will ever work for me. For many years, it was easier to believe that everything I experienced was my own fault, because blaming myself hurt less than believing my situation was the result of active and purposeful malice. The one thing that I know for sure is that my situation of pain was deliberate, and crafted - and I see nothing there to forgive. I can accept my life, and go on with my life, without allowing the monsters justification for being monsters.

FROM THE SCRIPT:

I dream of a child across a dark stairway, watching me. She remembers. She remembers white canopy beds from a five-year-old determination to be both a

princess and a sword maiden. She remembers cutting up sheets to hide blood stains, the type of blood she could never understand. I was a child too long, and my mind stayed young long after my body - that child was confused and soft and lost, the day she died.

What she left behind is angry.



Figure 9: Model Zoe Andersen, photographer Lirit Olyan. Sadism is about deliberate corruption and defilement. Do the stains ever come out? Do the beautiful things ever wash clean again?

THE ART: FROM MY THESIS JOURNAL

There was a child calling to me - she wants to know
Did you grow up to be a painter?

There is a sadist calling me too - and I have learned
To give pain when it is asked of me.
When you demand forgiveness, do we comply?
Or do we not scream out in the first place?
Do we feel no pain?

Or was pain the goal?

Who is the girl that you dream of at night?
What can she offer you, that a woman with her own will and voice cannot?

Is she a real doll that lives and breathes
Or did you need to take something living and beautiful
And break it?

Do you love the patterns my blood makes on paper?

I can see your world but not accept it
And
I owe you no absolution.

Dear Sadist:
Make me part of the sky.
Make me a legend
Let the world fade out
Until I am everything that's left.
Then let it explode.

The path of least resistance is often forgiveness. In some ways, it may even be the "right" thing to do. But I have come to believe that the path of least resistance does not always take us where we need to go - and my need is not merely to survive abuse, but to thrive beyond it. If it takes anger to do that, then I will be angry.

Chapter 8: Naming

Naming an abuser is something that can be highly ritualized; it happens in court, and behind closed doors with a therapist. Naming my own attacker was not something that I myself had put much thought into. I know his name, so of course I wrote it down. What I didn't expect was the reaction from people who read or heard the script. For some reason, the moment of naming seemed to hit all of them especially hard - the name somehow made it real, and brought the entire experience home for them.

Naming the self is also important. For example, do I choose to identify as a victim? A survivor? Just myself, Lirit? How much does it affect me when someone else chooses a name that I do not identify with? Many assault victims go through a process of distancing themselves - it is common to move away, change one's address, even change one's name. Personally, I bought a one-way ticket to Seattle and never planned to come back - and let me tell you, finally deciding to come back to New York to see my family and friends again was one of the hardest decisions I have ever made.

Naming was very important in the rehearsal process for this piece. The character I performed was named Neon, and my director Margaret Jumonville was extremely specific in rehearsals that we always ask questions of "what is Neon feeling in this passage?" rather than "what did you, Lirit, think or feel when you wrote this?" I am glad my director insisted on this, because it ended up giving me a layer of defense between myself and the script - allowing me to fall into a character that we all knew was myself, but still allowing distance so that I did not become as overwhelmed or have to directly relive my experiences. I think there is such a thing as being too vulnerable, and allowing myself to identify completely with the character would have been too much for me.

I address naming in the script:

But the thing is, Dimitri, you buy your power in isolation, in staying in the shadows. No one sees you do these things, no one knows for sure. It's so soft, so under the radar, that only those who become made of your violence can know it. Intimate, and silent, and personal - and no way to explain. No way to explain how your own defenses have been used to twist you, no way to ever articulate that perfectly planned and placed blow in the dark.

Your power is in isolation, invisibility. In believing your own lies so hard, we start to believe them too. In doing the things you do in the dark.

(The EXILES transform into the WITNESSES; here, they are allies. One by one they remove their faceless masks and become human, become backup, become power).

So find me here, Dimitri.

Find me here. Confront me here, under stage lights, where there is nowhere left to hide. I'm not hiding anymore. I have no shadows left in my life dark enough to hide you.

Call me a liar, here.

I have had generalized anxiety disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder my entire life; one of the first things you learn in cognitive behavioral therapy is that to name the monster is to expose the monster. By that same principle, giving my attacker something so concrete as his real-life name, to me, is gaining power over the story and my own existence within the story. A monster you cannot name is a monster you cannot defeat.



Figure 10: Production shot from this moment in the script, *“Find me here.”*

Chapter 9: Reuniting the Exiles

So, what is healing? I've spent a lot of time talking about the bad stuff, but what did I get out of all of this? Emotional healing is rather hard to pin down, but here are a few powerful moments I experienced.

Embodying The Exiles. It's one thing to know that my inner landscape is made up of different parts of me that are all fighting with each other. Some of them want to soothe me, some of them want to punish me, and mostly I ignore them because they aren't useful for daily functioning. To be honest, it's mostly late at night when I'm tired and no one else is around to distract me that I hear them - and those nights can be long.

I learned that it's another thing entirely to perform on stage as myself, or a part of myself, while movement artists are playing the roles of all those other pieces. It allowed me to isolate my own throughline, in a way - what parts are really me? What parts are fears that just stick with me? Which parts of myself am I ignoring that deeply need attention? I was lucky to find such a supportive set of artists to bring this story to life with me - people willing to embody my own emotional reality for the sake of the story.

Outward Momentum. Part of my toxicity is that I internalize - anger, disappointment, all those negative emotions only point inward. That's a lot of pressure to bear. I realized as soon as I started speaking, and going through vocal projection exercises with my director, that putting something *out* into the world is deeply different from holding it inside and constantly firing arrows into my own mind.

I have struggled a lot with speaking loudly and given volume to my voice; it always feels like taking up too much space. As soon as I started projecting the words I had written, as loudly as I could, the entire shape of my life felt different.

Confrontation. I know the name of my abuser. I know who he is, where he is, and what he has done. I know it so well that sometimes I am still surprised that no one else knows - he is so much a part of my reality that I forget that not everyone knows the story that lives just under my skin.

I confronted Dimitri himself years ago. It's the shadow of what's left of him in me that I still had to confront - and I built up my courage through my entire script to these lines:

But here's the thing I got, that no one else could ever give me: I saw it in you. A little flicker, of grief, of knowing. Your mouth ran out of excuses, and for that one moment, your eyes couldn't lie. In that one moment, you forgot to believe your own lie.

You remember too.

You always knew. Exactly what you are. And you need me to forgive you.

I've spent over a decade, fearing that thing that lives in my mirror, the part of me that let that happen, the part of me that let go. She lives outside of me, a monster and a predator - what lurks in my footsteps in street ways, beyond the last shred of light, the thing that lives in the mirror is coming for me tonight.

*The thing is, I am the monster that lives in your mirror.
I am the reality you can't escape.*

I am the reflection of the life you have chosen - I am the reflection you can't control.

So go ahead, tell me and tell me, the lies you remember.

I am the thing in the mirror that is coming for you.



Figure 11: Production photo of the moment in the script, "I am the thing in the mirror that's coming for you."

Chapter 10: The Mess

One of my biggest priorities in telling this story was expressing the *mess*. I don't think the emotional insides of how people hurt and function is ever truly clean - but I do find that we always want to articulate it that way. Sexual violence especially is so hard to talk about, that we want to tell a neat story that gets wrapped up in a bow in a 40-minute episode on television. We want to know that there are answers, and endings.

Maybe there are answers and endings, but they take longer than 40 minutes. I think that portrayals of sexual violence, such as one finds on crime TV shows, make us feel shame that we can't clean up our own messes in episode-length-chunks. Sometimes things I thought I got over years ago suddenly rear up and attack me again. Sometimes I stumble across memories I didn't know I had. The reorganization phase in recovery from sexual trauma is notoriously messy - it's about getting angry and pushing through the feelings that are uncomfortable to face.

When I first looked at this project, all I saw was a mess. I had a jumble of ideas, a jumble of images, and no notion at all of how it all would fit together. I was about ready to scream with frustration - how can a story that I know so well, not take a comprehensive shape? How can I not know how to tell a story that is literally my own life?

It was well past midnight on an exceptionally frustrating night that I realized the mess is the answer. Being raped is messy. Being beaten and cut and scarred is messy. Recovery, for me, is a thousand times more messy than that. There are no straight lines, no answers - but there is this mess. This chaos, this internal noise, these battling feelings. How better to express a mess than through a mess?

Scenically, I designed my production to be an abstracted bedroom full of clutter. The primary fixture is a mattress, my own childhood mattress, that I carry with me and always have. Throughout the production, The Exiles tear apart the room and scatter the props and scenic pieces everywhere - then slowly reassemble the room as I start to put my own pieces back together.



Figure 12: Model Emily Fevreayear, photographer Lirit Olyan. This photo shoot was themed around the idea of internal mess being brought to the outside of the body and represented physically.

Chapter 11: Cleanup (or Burial)

There's a person I was, and a person I still have to learn to be. I'm a work in progress, and I know that. One of the biggest things that I did for myself during this progress was allow my production to be a ritual. Every night, I built up the child that I lost, the child who died in my body; every night, I buried her, and let her go.

She might have been the best of me, but she wasn't all of me. Part of me survived. Part of me made it through those years, and I think I owe it to the parts of me that I lost to honor the parts of me that survived. My production was a confrontation, a description, a validation - and a burial. Let the child rest, and let me live clean.

FROM THE SCRIPT

I had this idea of a reality of me, that was made of nothing but me.

*I wonder all the time, I look over my shoulder for that silent stranger - the weird idea that there is **someone** I was supposed to be, **someone** that child dreamed of, and that **someone** follows me. Choked out, blacked out, beaten out. The day that I decided to stop fighting, to save my skin, to save what was left of me - it feels to me as if that's the day that woman died. That woman who would live in sunlight, and breathe only real air. Watch her life from inside of that window.*

I dream that I buried her. In my own childhood bed. I dream that I drowned her in white roses, let her go. Heroes die to save the innocent, but my innocent died for me - to save the skin, and not the soul. And I owe her, because she gave up her being, to give me a future - she, who was, and I think always will be, the best of me.

We have words for the loss of a lover, a friend, a parent - what are the words for the burial of self? What are the words for putting the self to rest, so that you can be something different?

I think I have the right to be something different.

*Years past, and I saw nothing of that woman, that woman I was **supposed to be**, the shadow-stranger who lives behind me, who breathes just out of sight. I thought that she was gone forever, a ghost of my own hindsight, but I dig real deep - I think that she still lives there, somewhere, sleeping. Waiting for me to catch up.*

I can't give that child with her clumsy oil pastel artist-in-a-box kit her life back. I can't remake the world in a shape where she doesn't spend those days in fear, those nights locked in a dark bathroom with the fuse cut because she confessed she was afraid of mirrors. I can't remake the world in a shape where she doesn't learn to hate the thudding

of knives, on repeat through the night. I can't give her a world where she doesn't learn to fear intimacy, where sex and love become weapons and the only options are to use or be used. Where you can either live and die a kind person, and an idiot - or a strong person, and cold..

*I **can** give her some neon hair, and a smile to match the world's envy. She had this idea of the woman I would be, and all the years in between can't take that from me. That child? She was so sure she would grow up to be a sword maiden, defend the world from darkness. She read too many fantasy novels.*

There is one sword I can give her, and it's made of fire, and will.

That girl has years ahead of her she doesn't know she will survive.

I can give her some god damn neon, and I can believe real hard that it glows in the dark.

FROM MY THESIS JOURNAL

There's a rose for grief
And a rose for effort
And a rose for rising free
Knowing that every story I've told you
Built that child into me

The deeply imperfect reality
That crawled out of the mess,
Different than I hoped, maybe -
Different, but not less.

I am not sick, I am injured. That's the key. You wouldn't expect someone with a broken leg to get up and walk around on it as if nothing happened; yet we share that expectation every day, that emotional damage can be magically overcome. That we are weak for being hurt. I am not crazy; I didn't need three years of therapy for being a "trouble child." I have been injured. I have been hurt. And I am healing.

This kind of storytelling isn't for everyone. No story is for everyone. When I was in high school, one of my few vivid memories is of a speaker who came to our school one day. He was a big man who told us his story of meth addiction, and how he had almost murdered his infant son through neglect before getting clean. It was a clear fear tactic - this man was willing to say anything to terrify us out of choosing the life that he had fallen into. I don't remember his name, or most of his speech, but I remember one girl

standing up and saying, “this has nothing to do with us. There isn’t a drug problem at this school. None of us need to hear this story.”

The speaker looked around at us, and he said:

“If you’re self-righteous enough to think this has nothing to do with you, get out. Leave right now. If you’re already so sold on your addiction that you’re not even listening to me, get out. I’m not talking to you. I’m talking to the one person, even if there’s only one in this room, who can hear me. The rest of you don’t matter.”

And he kicked them all out of the room - all but about a dozen of us.

I have received a thousand different responses and forms of feedback, and I am grateful for everyone one of them; but the fact remains, this story isn’t for everyone. If it reaches one person, brings one survivor some solace, then I have done what I have set out to do as an artist. Since I performed in *Reflection: a dream* I have held sobbing colleagues as they told me stories they have never revealed to anyone else. I have received letters and emails of thanks for validating the struggles other students are feeling (most of them anonymous). I believe that I have done what I set out to do, which is touch at least one person; I have given them more than I had when I started. I have succeeded.

FROM MY THESIS JOURNAL

To a stranger on a bus:

I see your pain and I remember

What it is to make yourself so small no one can see

How much words hurt when words have already failed you

How much safer silence is

What it means to be dying inside your own body

Screaming at the top of your voice but inside your own skull when no one can hear

And the volume makes your bones rattle

But you have learned that smile very well

And you will wear it till that last inch of you decays

What it means to tell a different story with your eyes than the one written in bruises under your clothing

Written in blood tucked up inside you

In all the places scars don't show

I have learned that I am one in an army of women

Who have learned their own language of pain and defiance

In the briefest glance we know each other, and

I do not know how to help you today but

Stranger on the bus, we see you

We remember
And you are not
Alone.

Appendix

This appendix exists to supplement my paper with the full breadth of the creative project itself. The following URL links will give access to various components of the project as listed:

To access the full photo story:

<https://liritelizabetholyan.smugmug.com/>

To access the script:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/16BAS_YmokYVEzhM_PT5GKPgsPXOS9xrbxzMyczihaxs/edit?usp=sharing

To access my portfolio site for videos and continued work:

<http://www.liritelizabetholyan.com/thesis/>

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