

Fractured Images: A Collection of Poetry  
Exploring Neurodivergent Women and Intimate Partner Violence

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A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State  
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University  
Honors College

Fall 2023

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my thesis director, Dr. Bryanna Licciardi, for taking this journey with me and being my sounding board through this entire process. Your insights and advice made this process enjoyable and much less stressful than it could have been.

I want to thank my little sister, Reece, for giving me a safe place to write, study, and live throughout this time of transition in my life. I do not know where I would be without you.

## **Abstract**

Many women who are the victims of intimate partner violence have identifiable risk factors, among which are recognizable traits of mental illnesses such as autism, anxiety, ADHD, and depression. My hypothesis is that women with these conditions are victimized because predators recognize these traits as vulnerabilities, which are then exploited through manipulation and isolation tactics. This work is a collection of poetry and memoirs that provide personal insight into the mind and emotions of a woman in this vicious cycle, alongside academic research that offers context and other essential information. My goal is to foster understanding and empathy for neurodivergent women who have lived through intimate partner violence, as well as insight for the women in these situations on their healing journey.

## Preface

My great grandmother baked. She made the most intricate braided breads, friendship breads, sourdough, Challa, cinnamon rolls, and milk bread. She made the best bread when she was angry; our neighbors used to joke that her husband riled her up on purpose to get a good meal. If you passed by the house and smelled her butter, garlic, and herb bread, you knew to just keep walking.

The people at church knew the smell of her rose perfume and the tap-tap-tapping sound of her kitten heels on the church's hardwood. The neighbors and deacons knew her bright smile, beautiful singing voice, and brilliance on the church organ. However, I knew that she winced when she leaned over the counter to grab the yeast starter. I knew that she gathered her ingredients from the pantry while clutching her ribs. I knew that she beat and pounded the dough until she was sobbing, and her hair came loose from her bun, because what other outlet was there for a pastor's wife? On Sundays after church, her husband would get drunk and beat her, and on Monday evening the whole neighborhood would have fresh bread with their supper. All they knew was how good her bread was.

In high school I went to church three times a week just like my great grandmother. I taught Sunday school and helped with Vacation Bible School. I sang in the choir and fell in love with the music minister who had baby blue eyes and floppy dark hair. The younger kids loved me so much, and it felt like they gave my life a purpose. With them, my "quirkiness" and ADHD were not hindrances; the constant need to move around simply allowed me to keep up with fast little legs and understand swiftly changing moods. I started writing poetry seriously when the music minister and I lost our first

baby. I wasn't allowed to work with children anymore because if He would take my own away, obviously God didn't want me around kids. I won a writing award in English class that semester for my poetry.

I learned later that, like my great grandmother's bread, my grandma's scrapbooking, and my mother's short stories, poetry was the only acceptable outlet through which I could feel my emotions without being a problem to my partner. But like those women before me, being unproblematic is a tricky thing to achieve when you don't seem to function like everyone else.

As I grew, loved, and had many more life experiences, I learned to quietly acknowledge things to myself that we did not give voice to at home: First, that every female within my family for the past four generations has experienced intimate partner violence. Though we never talked about it, we all had our outlets. Second, that every adult female in my family in the past three generations has also been diagnosed with a mental illness. Not until my sisters and I were all diagnosed with autism, a developmental disorder, did I share my poetry with them.

My acceptance of these shared family traits and experiences led to an interest in researching mental health issues and trying to understand how women end up in violent relationships as well as how this violence can affect them. My idea for this project is to entwine my poetry and research on mental health and relationship violence. I have focused on three mental illnesses which I can speak about from personal experience: autism, ADHD, and depression. Since domestic violence is an extremely broad topic and has its own assumptions, I will be using the term "intimate partner violence" (IPV) and focus on violence within heterosexual romantic relationships.

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## List of Terms

*Intimate Partner Violence:* Intimate partner violence (IPV) “refers to behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors.”<sup>1</sup> Within this paper, the intimate relationships researched are heterosexual relationships.

*Mental Illness:* According to the American Psychiatric Association, “mental illnesses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior” or a combination thereof. The APA also states that 19% of adults in the United States experience some form of mental illness.<sup>2</sup>

*Neurodivergent:* A neurodivergent person is one whose brain differs in mental or neurological functioning from what is considered normal or typical. A person without these differences is referred to as *neurotypical*. For this project, I will focus only on neurodivergence related to people on the autism spectrum and those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and bipolar disorders.

*Revictimization:* Revictimization is the repeated victimization of an individual. For example, a person might be the victim of abuse as a child and then become victimized later in life by sexual assault or IPV.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, “Intimate Partner Violence: Definition,” <https://apps.who.int/violence-info/intimate-partner-violence/>.

<sup>2</sup> American Psychiatric Association, “What is Mental Illness?,” <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness>.



*Sexual Violence:* Sexual violence is a non-legal term used to reference all crimes of a sexual nature including rape, sexual assault, sexual coercion, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, stalking, and relationship violence such as IPV.<sup>3</sup> The commonality is a notable lack of consent from the party upon whom the act is being inflicted.

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<sup>3</sup> Michigan State University, “Sexual Violence Definition,” *Center for Survivors*, <https://centerforsurvivors.msu.edu/education-resources/sexual-violence-educational-information/sexual-violence-definitions.html>.

## Chapter 1: Trauma

For many victims of trauma, the effects on the brain can be life-long and alter their day-to-day life. While trauma and victimization can occur in many forms, I focus on IPV and original trauma. There are many types of IPV, and each comes with its own physical and mental impacts on the victim. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) reports that one-in-four women experience severe IPV, one in five women in the US have been raped, and one in seven women have been stalked by an intimate partner causing them to fear for their lives.<sup>4</sup> The World Health Organization states that as many as 38% of all murders of women are perpetrated by their intimate partners.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to physical violence, IPV also includes sexual, emotional, economic, psychological, and technological abuse.<sup>6</sup> While society has vastly different views on the severity of the offenses, each can be detrimental to the long-term mental and physical health of the victim. Women who have experienced IPV often struggle with depression, PTSD, self-isolation, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and attempts, alcohol and substance abuse, lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, and self-blame.<sup>7</sup> Approximately 9% of

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<sup>4</sup> National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, "Statistics," <https://ncadv.org/STATISTICS>.

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization, "Violence Against Women," Last updated 9 March 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

women who experience IPV are diagnosed with PTSD, 8% are diagnosed with a depressive mood disorder, and 12% are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.<sup>8</sup>

Women who have been victimized in childhood and as young adults have a higher risk for revictimization. Sexual assault survivors often have difficulty “forming and sustaining intimate relationships” as they exhibit many of the symptoms described above.<sup>9</sup> Anywhere from fifteen to 33% of women have been sexually assaulted in childhood and carry those long-term effects into adulthood.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Behice Han Almis, et al., “Risk Factors for Domestic Violence in Women and Predictors of Development of Mental Disorders in These Women,” *Noro Psikiyatri Arsivi* 55 (2018): 68-69.

<sup>9</sup> Heather Brick, “Mechanisms Involved in Sexual Assault Revictimization,” *The University of Montana*, 15 December 1999, <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=9931&context=etd>.

<sup>10</sup> Melissa A. Polsney and Victoria M. Follette, “Long-Term Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse: Theory and Review of the Empirical Literature,” *Applied & Preventive Psychology* 4 (1995): 143.

## *Naivety*

I sneak glances at him all night, but since it's a small party (only eight of us), it's pathetically obvious. We play truth or dare. Everyone is choosing truth because the dares (stripping or stealing traffic cones) get old fast. In my best friend's apartment, we drink, giggle, and tell absurd stories, one-upping each other with our trauma-filled lives over a game of truth or dare. Dean's brother slipped into addiction after a horrific car accident. Joel's parents disowned him after they caught him with his first boyfriend. Katie was raped before sophomore year started. In a roundabout way, that's how she and her boyfriend got together; he was her older brother's best friend and the first person she told. He's been unbearably protective ever since, even retook some classes this semester just to be with her during the day. It's super romantic and I tell her all the time how envious I am of her romance-novel life. Katie tries to help me flirt with Dean all night, but I'm apparently really bad at it because he just looks at me like I'm being silly.

Only two of the boys are sober, so we plead with them to drive us to the park where we can push each other on the swings and stick our feet in the little creek. They agree reluctantly and Katie shoves me into the front seat of Dean's car with a wink. He cautiously hands me the auxiliary cord and a metal Taylor Swift cover blasts over the stereo, "You Belong with Me." It's perfect and exactly how I feel, so I laugh and change it to "I Prevail." Dean starts to sing along, and my seat gets kicked when Kate notices I'm drooling over this man and not making a move.

We get to the park and the darkness pervades the air, one or two lights shining among the trees. The sky has opened and rain is gently falling. It cools my overheated skin. Something warm is wrapped around my bare shoulders. I glance up to see Dean staring into the distance with a small smile on his lips as he covers me with his leather jacket. We stay at the park for an hour or two, or maybe it's just a few minutes; all I know is that he is talking to me and my head is spinning.

We discuss bands and our favorite books. He talks about God and his family's struggle with addiction, and I feel such a connection that it warms me from the inside out and the chill of the early spring air can't reach me. The others yell and toss empty soda bottles at us trying to get us to stop being boring and join them in the frigid water they're splashing in a few yards away. He gets up and shoves one of the guys in the creek and everyone laughs as the boy comes up sputtering while Dean walks back and holds his hand out to me. It's brief, but I swear my skin burns where he touched it long after he lets go.

On the way back to the apartment, the heat is on, and people are crowded in the backseat half asleep from a mixture of alcohol and excitement. Dean has the radio on low, ACDC I think, and his hand is resting palm up on the center console. My phone vibrates in my lap, and I read a message from Katie: *That's for you. HOLD HIS HAND.*

A week later my bag sits on the floor by his bed as we go over sociology homework together. My ex broke into my apartment yesterday and I'm too scared to go back because the cops said there's no proof it was him. But he left roses on my desk and that was his nickname for me, Rose. Dean believes me, and he helps me pack a bag to stay at his place. It's his night to host the party, so I help make salsa and cornbread and

set out the stuff for tacos. Tequila is the drink of the night, and when I drink too much and can't handle it, he sets me up in his room while everyone leaves or gets settled in the living room. We talk for hours, and by the time we fall asleep I've told him things that no one else knows.

Another week and I have only gone back to my place for new clothes and to do laundry. Dean and I see each other every hour of every day. We share three classes and have the same friends. We go to lunch, and we all play pool after the day is over. When we go home at night we go together and talk until the early hours of the morning before repeating the cycle over the next day. I feel more seen, known, and heard than I have in years. It's perfect and peaceful and he is amazing.

A month later the group is all out at a bar celebrating the end of midterms. It's not our usual bar and there are some extras in our group, friends of friends I suppose. I barely see Dean once we get there. Katie and I each throw back a shot and laugh as we cough at the burn. Dean and some friends are at the bar taking shots and talking; he starts to look annoyed, so I leave Katie and go over to him. His friend notices me before Dean, grins at me and introduces himself as he pulls me in for a hug. I wobble a bit in my heeled boots, and he puts his hands on my arms to help me regain my balance. Dean has an odd look on his face, but it's not annoyance anymore, which is good. He nods to his friend, kisses me on the cheek, and excuses himself to the restroom, handing me a mixed drink as he goes.

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I run a hand across my eyes, wiping crust out of the corners and wincing. They burn from the cigarette smoke in the bar, only... I'm not in the bar. Cool sheets whisper

across my legs and I nuzzle my face into a pillow that smells as if it just came out of the dryer. I force my eyes open, and the room suddenly starts spinning; the light from the half-opened blinds feels as if it's trying to bore a hole through my head. I'm in a strange room with strange voices coming from the hall and a strange shirt covering me.

I look around for my stuff in this unfamiliar room as it begins to spin. I peer out the door to find an empty hallway and a bathroom within sight and dash toward the door. I lose the contents of my stomach thrice before I hoist myself into the shower and sit under the ice-cold water trying to slow my racing heart, trying to calm this fever that seems to have come out of nowhere.

I have no idea how long I sit there before a quiet voice calls from the other side of the door asking if I'm okay. I must not have locked the door, because a beautiful blonde girl slips in and closes the door behind her. She's holding a stack of clothes in her arms and has a phone in her hand. She timidly hands me the phone and I see that it's my floral case, though the screen has new cracks all over it. She tells me to take as long as I need and not to worry about returning the clothes before she slips out again and locks the door behind her. I text Katie and send her a pin for my location. I'm on the other side of town from the bar and my apartment.

I sit across from Dean and Katie in a loud diner after they pick me up. We were silent the whole ride here. I have no idea what to say. Katie looks confused and Dean looks angry but not surprised. I can't bear to say anything. Not out loud. I text Katie from across the table as Dean shoots glances back and forth at us, irritated that he's being left out of the conversation. I'm not trying to hurt him, but I feel that if I open my mouth to speak, nothing will come out. Katie relays my messages to him as we go, and I sit at the

table and stare at a single knot in the pine wood, nodding assent when she asks for clarification. He huffs but doesn't say a word until she is finished.

"That's all," Katie says. I feel sick to my stomach. Dean sits upright in his chair, and I can't discern the look in his eyes. Disgust, resignation, guilt? "I can't believe that's the best story you could come up with for cheating on me," he rasps out. He grabs his car keys and jacket before throwing some cash on the table and walking out the door. I stare at the table in shock. My throat feels thick like it's going to close in on itself, and I only realize I'm crying when tears hit the table in front of me.

"I don't care what happened," Katie says, wringing her hands. "You're still my best friend, and he can turn the guys against you, but not me." I don't understand what she's saying. Is this not supposed to be a bigger deal? Did I not say it right? Why is he upset with me and not his friend? I know I didn't cheat on him, and I don't understand how he could possibly believe that either.



**Feb 28<sup>th</sup>**

Now I don't trust a single laugh or smile.

Every touch has some hidden intention.

The fear of men that had been faded for a while?

It's risen with a seeming vengeance.

When you said what you said

And lied to my face

Of feelings you could never offer—

Then you left me alone with my hurt and disgrace

Feeling like I wasn't even worth the bother.

I wanted to drown, so a bottle I found

And hid behind a cigarette in the bathroom

With a knife to my chest, all I wanted was to press

Something cold to my head and erase you.

Because with you I felt the most, and every night you held me close

Was a promise you never meant to keep

So, I tried to drown my love with drinks.

Now you know too much — all the words I had locked up

And kept hidden away for years.

You listened to my pain that burned behind all the tears

And you took it in stride and let me hold onto my pride  
And no judgment left your lips; no negligent hand touched my skin.  
So absorbed with taking in the fact that a man could *see* me  
And not run and hide, that I forgot the fact that  
You have to look behind the mask and see  
That sometimes people lie.

## Silenced

It started out a stormy night  
She never could put up a fight.  
Her tears would hit the bathroom floor  
He slammed her head against the door.  
The cops were called but no one cared  
She'd run as often as she dared.  
He dragged her back and locked her in  
Never hit hard enough to break the skin.

The girl put a fence around her soul  
No one could come close enough to melt the cold.

A baby girl of only nine  
Already wanting to end her life.  
Her friend who came close to breaching the wall  
Didn't come back to school in the fall.  
The cops found a body during break  
It was more than the little girl thought she could take.

He made her life a living hell  
She knew better than to ever tell.  
He'd sneak into her room late at night

Sometimes the bruises were in plain sight.

The teachers never said a word

The little girl got used to not being heard—

And just like that, with their terrible choice

The little girl lost her voice.

## A Death

Until you feel gravel and sand  
Carving scars into your back  
From minutes of laying  
On a hard ground —  
Until you feel evil inside you  
Inducing a fraudulent pleasure  
Tainting your mind and your heart  
Shattering your soul —  
Until you can tell me the color of death  
Or the reason one sees red  
And can remember this red  
When she should see blue skies —  
Then you can say what you like of me  
For we are alike, sisters;  
I will understand you.  
Until then, know that your words and  
Your excuses for them are useless.  
I hope they taste like they're bitter and fruitless.

## Chapter 2: Neurodivergence in Women

The American Psychiatric Association states that one in five US adults experiences some form of mental illness that involves changes in emotion, thinking, or behavior.<sup>11</sup> People with mental illness find it difficult to function in relationships, social situations, work and school environments, and around neurotypical family members.

It is only in recent years that many mental illness diagnostic tests have become accessible and appropriate for women and girls. Symptoms of mental illnesses like autism and ADHD are expressed differently in males and females, which has historically caused females to remain undiagnosed for most, if not all, of their lives. Women with autism often struggle to obtain a proper diagnosis, as females are more likely to engage in “masking,” or hiding their symptoms from others to their own detriment.<sup>12</sup> Some characteristics of these disorders do remain the same across sex, such as repetition in play and the need of a routine, actions that are self-soothing, emotional upsets over slight changes, obsessive interests, and unusual reactions to sensual stimuli.<sup>13</sup>

The symptoms women with ADHD exhibit are vastly different from those of their male counterparts. Men are typically diagnosed early due to easily recognizable symptoms such as disruptive outbursts, anger, and impulsivity, all of which affect others. Women, on the other hand, deal with distraction, disorganization, lack of motivation, and

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<sup>11</sup> American Psychiatric Association. “What is Mental Illness?” Reviewed by Ihuoma Njuku M.D. November 2022, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/what-is-mental-illness>.

<sup>12</sup> National Autistic Society, “Autism in Women and Girls,” Accessed 17 October 2023, <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism/autistic-women-and-girls#:~:text=Autistic%20characteristics%20in%20women%20and,result%20in%20anxiety%20and%20overwhelm>.

<sup>13</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Autism Spectrum Disorder; Signs and Symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder,” Last updated March 28, 2022, [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html#:~:text=Autism%20spectrum%20disorder%20\(ASD\)%20is,or%20repetitive%20behaviors%20or%20interests](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html#:~:text=Autism%20spectrum%20disorder%20(ASD)%20is,or%20repetitive%20behaviors%20or%20interests).

forgetfulness, but these internalized symptoms only affect themselves. In women, ADHD symptoms commonly manifest as emotional issues like anxiety and depression. Because their symptoms are not disruptive enough to necessitate intervention in school or social situations, ADHD in women is often underdiagnosed.<sup>14</sup>

Underdiagnosis leads to many other negative impacts. Because women are less likely to be diagnosed, they are less likely to get the necessary care, education, and support. Without medication or a system of care, it is easy to see how a woman could turn to self-medicating and other methods of exerting control over her external life as her internal life is a quagmire. Methods of control include forms of self-harm, eating disorders, and closely followed routines and habits that may inhibit healthy relationships.

In the United States, women with serious mental illnesses (SMI) such as depression and personality disorders are at a higher risk for IPV than the general population.<sup>15</sup> They are also at higher risk for abuse. Women with SMI experience physical abuse at a rate of 47% and sexual abuse at a rate of 37%.<sup>16</sup> Women without SMI experience these types of abuse at rates of 21% and 23%, respectively.<sup>17</sup> Women with depressive disorders are more likely to experience IPV in their lifetime, with rates roughly between 15% and 89%, which is much higher than the national average.<sup>18</sup>

### *Forbidden Fruit*

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<sup>14</sup> Darby E. Attoe and Emma A. Climie, "Miss. Diagnosis: A Systematic Review of ADHD in Adult Women," *Journal of Attention Disorders* 7, (27 May 2023): 646.

<sup>15</sup> Tonya B. Van Deirse, et al., "Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault Among Women with Serious Mental Illness: A Review of Prevalence and Risk Factors," *Journal of Social Work* 19, no. 6 (2019): 790.

<sup>16</sup> Van Deirse, et al., "Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault Among Women with Serious Mental Illness," 802.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 805.

“It’s not normal for fifteen-year-old girls to be thinking these types of thoughts,” Dr. Collier says. He sighs and sets his notes on the coffee table, pushing his glasses up. “I think we’ve worked through your past trauma in our time together. It’s time to consider that these feelings are part of a condition separate from the bad things that have happened to you.” He leans forward on his elbows, hands clasped in front of him. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I stare at the top button of his shirt. There's a string sticking out that I want to cut. I know he’s waiting for a reply, but what does he want me to say? He’s saying there’s something wrong with me, but I have known this my whole life. He’s not telling me anything I don’t already know. I knew when I was seven, I knew when I was twelve, I knew when I was fourteen.

“I think medication and exercise is the best route here.” The doctor clicks his pen and writes something on the notepad before standing. He walks to the door and opens it, ushering me forward. My adopted mom Joy waits in the adjoining room. She closes her book and stands up as we enter. He hands her a paper and talks with her quietly while I find an overstuffed chair and sit down. I’m so tired. Joy shakes me awake a few minutes later to leave.

I fall asleep again in the car, only waking when we park at the pharmacy. I can feel the tension in the silence. She wants to ask something, but I know she won’t. I get out of the car and walk toward the doors, forcing her to follow me. At the pharmacy window the lady asks how she can help. Joy hands her the prescription and flinches when



the tech reads my prescription for Prozac out loud. I can't tell if she's embarrassed for me or for herself. When we get home, she goes over the instructions religiously and watches me take the first pill.

Dr. Collier changes the dose twice over the next few months until we find one that works. Joy has me choose a sport so I can get enough exercise to trick my brain into making dopamine. Swimming is my favorite, but I worry I'll fall asleep in the pool and drown, so in the end we pick dance. The church we go to has a small dance team that practices with their band twice a week. Joy also finds a community dance center that has classes every Tuesday. God help her, she's trying her best. I feel so ungrateful that I can never muster up enthusiasm when she tries so hard. It would have been better if she had adopted any other child. Anyone would have been a better daughter than me.

I make a few friends on the dance team. The girls are beautiful and welcoming, and I try to match their energy so I don't bring the team down. At the community center I find a dance partner, Sammy, who is amazing at leading. He's so tall that when we do lifts, I feel like I'm flying. My brain seems to finally work right when we're together; all my thoughts shut off and I feel the energy running through my body. I've figured out that on days when I dance, I don't need as much medication. Now, when mom gives me the pill, I cut it in half and save the rest for when I need it.

Sammy and I become best friends within weeks. The other girls side-eye me at the community center whenever we go off to talk alone. Sammy tells me not to let it get to me, they're just jealous. We talk on the landline every day after school until our parents make us hang up. He makes me laugh, and he always seems interested in the latest book I'm reading or what my dog got into that day. When we talk, I feel like I can

close my eyes and not have the thoughts bombard me from all sides. My head finally seems at peace.

I've felt so good for months now, with only the occasional bad day. I've found I can brush the thoughts aside more easily. Kind of like water off a windshield. Now, I'm only taking half my medication and it seems to be working.

I don't sense the change coming. I'm at the church after rehearsal when a text comes from Sammy's number. There's an image attached which I automatically open. It's a picture of one of the girls from dance who goes to school with Sammy. She's wearing a bikini top and smirking at the camera with his favorite hat on her head. I slam the phone down, snatch my purse off the ground, and walk out. My hands shake and I can't tell if I'm breathing as I walk down the hallway to the bathroom. I push the door and set my purse on the counter and stare at the girl in the mirror. God, I hate her. I hate that she's so stupid and naïve. I hate that she thought she could be happy. Because that's never going to happen.

I can feel the panic setting in, and I know I need my medication. I reach into my purse and unzip the back pocket where I keep all the pill halves I've saved. I look in and realize there's a lot more than I thought. I take one and stare at it for a moment before I reach in again and take a small handful. I swallow them down with water from the sink. I splash my face, wash my hands, and walk out.

I walk to the rehearsal room and sit down in a chair at the back. I pull out my phone with shaking hands, looking at our text thread again to see if I missed any signs that Sammy would lie to me like this. I never questioned him when he said I was the only girl he was interested in. *Maybe I should have*, I think as my vision blurs. I close my eyes

and lean back in the chair, my head falling back. My heart feels like a hummingbird in my chest. The room is too warm. I sit up to take my hoodie off, but I feel heavy and so tired that I can't manage it. I give up and lay back, lulled to sleep by the drum-like beating of my heart.

I wake up gagging and coughing, half of my face is against the scratchy carpet of the rehearsal room. A girl's voice floats over me, high pitched and irritating. Hands hold my face roughly on either side, a set of fingers are in my mouth pushing against the back of my throat. I gag violently again and try to close my mouth against the fingers, furious. "Stop fighting us," the girl's voice says from behind me as she wraps her hands tightly against my arms and holds me in place. The fingers push once more, and I vomit uncontrollably onto the carpet. Tears and snot run down my face, joining the frothy bile.

I sob into the carpet, the girl's arms tightening around me. As she sets her head on my shoulder, I can tell she's also crying, softly. A large hand smooths the hair out of my face before the boy gets up and comes back momentarily with baby wipes. They help me sit up and he wipes my face clean. "Help me get her to the showers in the gym. She's burning up," the girl chokes. The pastor's kids, Jack and Kaley, are somehow the only ones in the room with me. Everyone else has already left. They half carry me to the other side of the building; Jack has my gym bag slung over his shoulder. In the bathroom, Kaley helps me undress and pin my hair up while the water warms.

"What happened," she asks. Her eyes are red, and I feel guilty for putting her through this. I don't know if I would take it back though. If I could go back, I would have just stayed in the bathroom. I chuckle under my breath, "A minor inconvenience is what happened."

I look up at the ceiling as the water hits me. I feel so weak that I worry my legs might give out. “You’re just delaying the inevitable,” I tell her. “I don’t think I was meant to live this long. God just forgot that fact.” Kaley scoffs and I look over to see her scowling at me. I finish removing the evidence of my failure and clumsily get dressed. I could try to explain better, but she would never understand, so what’s the point.

Joy picks me up from the front of the church half an hour later none the wiser. I keep waiting for Jack and Kaley to rat me out, but they never do. They do, however, keep a much closer eye on me on rehearsal days and I never seem to be alone. The next time I check the stash in my purse, I find it completely empty. I’m not sure how to feel.

Maybe I overreacted, but at the time it felt like the end of the world. I felt like the lowest, most worthless creature on the planet. I stop taking my meds entirely. I tell Joy they make me feel weird and that I don’t need them anymore. She seems relieved and agrees quickly. She says she always thought Dr. Collier was a quack, so I stop going to sessions with him too.

—

Looking back, I realize that I lived within the perfect storm. Small town prejudices, religious parents, outsider status, mental illnesses, and trauma came together to create a foreign, treacherous environment. Joy’s husband was kind, but he didn’t believe in mental illness. Joy was uncomfortable with my diagnosis and ignored it as best she could. I felt like my thoughts, body, and actions were not my own.

## **Depression**

I want to feel my worth.  
On the days when this disease gets the best of me  
The thing I need the most  
Eludes me completely.  
My creativity runs wild,  
But when I set my hand to a task  
All my will leaves me  
And this creature settles heavy upon my shoulders  
And covers my bright eyes with its tarnished hands.

## Arrhythmia

Life hits, and it hits different.

I have to find the things that make me smile

And wring all the joy out of them

That I possibly can.

I listen to the beat of my own heart.

One hit of dopamine.

One beat. Two.

I know every word of every song on this album.

Three beats. Four.

I can mimic every expression of this character.

Five beats. Six.

The obsession is the only thing

Keeping me standing.

My mom says she understands

And that it's okay to be sad.

But when sadness is automatic, effortless,

The default,

Am I sad?

Or am I just something that's been broken too badly

To ever be right again?

Because no, they don't understand.

They judge me for listening

To the same ten songs on repeat for weeks.

But without them

I'm on my knees, head in my hands

Fingers in my ears on the bathroom floor

Just trying to breathe.

Because when the "sadness" hits

It *pounds* me into the ground.

And everything I want to do or say

Or accomplish during the day?

It fades into me curled up on the cool of kitchen tiles

Or huddled in the backseat of my car

Trying not to scream.

And if I take that pill

Will I still be me?

Will I be a better version,

The one I was meant to be?

Or will the side effects make it worse than before

Where my typically gentle self  
Resorts to slamming doors?  
Will I be sick to my stomach  
And only this time it will be full?  
Or will crying in my backseat  
End up with me in a ditch  
Staring up at my feet off the floor?



## Out of Line

Overachieving, overreacting

Undersized, unimpressed

Unfulfilling, undeserving

Out of line, out of bounds

Unfeeling, overreaching

Searching for something to deconstruct

My mess.

Unpleasant, unimportant

Uninspired,

The biggest mistake of someone's life.

Never meant to see the light

Better off without

Better off gone

Better off a whole new tune

Than the same old boring song.

Better start anew

Than try to unweave a tangled web.

Better to cut all ties

Than end up with regret.

Every word circles my head

Like a crown of thorns

-Mea culpa-

They're my own, it's simply self-hatred

Words of faceless people

Created by myself

Repeat on an endless loop

And plague me with self-doubt.

## The Ice in My Chest

There's an inexpressible emptiness that sinks inside my chest sometimes.

My mind goes blank;

I can hear people talking

But it's blurred as though experiencing it through water.

I can hear. I can see. I can feel.

But it's not quite right, and I can't react.

There's nothing in me in that moment that cares about anything.

It scares me.

It scares me because these moments happen much more frequently than before.

Because the insane high I feel at times

Can be replaced by the deepest darkness in a matter of a thought, a look, a memory,

a sound.

It's not that I want to die, or even that I don't want to be there;

I'm not here.

I'm already gone, and I didn't even make the conscious decision to be.

What's terrifying is knowing that it's happening

And not having the will to stop it.

Knowing that I'm sinking, drowning even,

But not bothering to swim even though my lungs are bursting

And my vision's blurring.

## Mask

I'm my own worst enemy, I know.  
But I've got these thoughts running round in my head  
That I can't let go.  
Because I know you'll leave  
Just as soon as you see...  
Where you healed and grew  
I ran and hid like a frightened child,  
And there's no coming back for me.  
Because the things that I crave  
—Warmth, light, comfort, a grave—  
Have put me in a place where you can't follow  
Because I want you to stay sane.

But right now  
My insecurities keep  
getting the best of me,  
And the monsters that I see  
Aren't the ones under the bed any more  
They're the people sitting right next to me.  
And I can't trust a word from  
Their mouths to my ears,

And I'm scared to death  
That my name will be on their next breath.  
Because they know me by the rumors they created  
To wipe away all the things they did  
That brought me to this place.

And if they had space to fill me  
It was only because I was already hollowed out inside,  
Eaten away by the hurt and the lies  
Of false *I've got you*s and *you're fine*s.

And I was fed to the wolves  
By brothers and ex-lovers  
And the gun at my back  
Wasn't watching my six—  
It was waiting to put me down  
As soon as I slipped.

And with every move and every glance  
I feel like I'm doing a twisted dance  
To keep them from peering  
Beneath the mask.

Because the next time someone asks  
*Are you okay?*

My legs and my spine and my soul  
Will give way  
And all the words I've wanted to say  
Since February fucking 28th  
Will come rushing out  
With a cry or a shout.  
And people will come running  
To see a girl who tries to look like all others.  
They'll see all the things  
I'm not allowed to say and  
Then they'll turn away  
As they put the mask back over my face.

## The Letter

I can't do this anymore.

To all my friends getting married, having kids,

Starting their new lives and jobs:

I am SO proud of you.

Some of us didn't think we'd make it through high school.

Some of us wanted to self-destruct long ago, but we held on.

I'm proud of us.

I always knew some of us would make it out

I could see the fire in your eyes

Even when we were stupid kids

Running our mouths and daring to dream.

You gave me hope for so many years

You are the reason I sleep at night

And believe that tomorrow could be a better day.

But I've started to think that a better day isn't coming.

Maybe that's okay.

I've always been the friend who messes things up,

Who looks at themselves ten times a day and wonders

*Why did I say that?*

*What is wrong with me?*

I surround myself with insane, compassionate  
Courageous, honest, open, dedicated, heartfelt people

Because I hope to be like them.

I've tried to reconstruct myself out of the bits and pieces

I pick up in relationships.

But this is not Build-a-Bear.

I'm not who I want to be.

I'm starting to wonder if that's okay.

While I love everything about the people I let into my life,

I can't figure out how to do the same for myself.

I can't keep doing this.

I'm so sorry.

I love you.

I'm proud of you.



### Chapter 3: Tactics of Abusers

When one thinks of an abusive relationship, they often have an image in their head of a small, beaten, cowering woman and a cruel, hulking man in a dirty wife-beater. That is rarely the situation. Abusers can come in many forms, as can the abuse they perpetrate. While physical abuse is easiest to recognize, other forms of abuse can be similarly detrimental to the well-being of the victim. Abusers use a variety of power and control techniques that make it hard for the victim to leave, while simultaneously making it easy for the abuser to displace blame.

Intimidation, emotional abuse, and coercion or threats are three tactics of abusers that are more easily recognizable due to their frequent use in media. Intimidation can present in many ways, such as slamming doors, punching walls, or breaking dishes. The destruction of inanimate objects reflects what the abuser would like to do to the victim and is used as a means of frightening the victim into submission.<sup>19</sup>

Emotional abuse has some representation in the media, but certain aspects of it remain underrepresented. Name calling, insults, constant criticism, humiliation, and degradation are all aspects of emotional abuse that can wreak havoc on the victim's sense of self.<sup>20</sup> Emotional abuse is not comprised of a single argument, but out of many, constant instances where the abuser's words eat away at their victim's self-esteem and self-worth. Another form of emotional abuse is gaslighting, where the abuser makes the

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<sup>19</sup> Delaware.gov, "Dynamics of Domestic Violence," *Domestic Violence Coordinating Council*, 2011, <https://dvcc.delaware.gov/background-purpose/dynamics-domestic-abuse/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

victim feel crazy and causes them to doubt their own experiences, memories, feelings, and beliefs.

Coercion and threats are shown to a lesser degree in media, but the threat of violence against the victim or their family members is a common trope in certain genres. While the threat of violence is something most people understand, there is another method that is equally harmful and perhaps more nefarious in which the abuser threatens self-harm or suicide to coerce their victim to do what they want. This threat is especially effective within the dynamics of a relationship because the victim might feel the burden of guilt for the abuser's death.

Economic abuse, isolation, minimization, and blame are other tactics of abusers. However, they are shown so infrequently in the media that it is harder to recognize them in real life. Economic abuse can happen when one party controls the finances of the other. An example of this is if a couple marries, and the wife gives up her job to parent their child, she relies on her husband to provide financially. This happened in my family and from the outside it seems innocent. However, if wife must get permission from the husband to buy a coffee or medication, it creates an uneven power dynamic that could easily turn controlling and abusive.<sup>21</sup>

Isolation does not seem particularly harmful at first, but getting a woman away from her family and friends who have her best interests in mind and know how to interpret her behavior is form of abuse used to hide other abuse. Isolation often begins with one partner needing or demanding to always know the whereabouts and company of the other. The abusive partner will make it seem that their victim should cut people out of

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<sup>21</sup> US Department of Justice, "Domestic Violence," *Office of Violence Against Women*, last updated 17 March 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/domestic-violence>

her life for her own mental health or for the health of the relationship. Eventually, the victim has distanced herself from friends, family, coworkers, and anyone she could turn to for help. Often, the victim has so much guilt about pushing people away that it makes it even harder to reach back out to them for help when deciding to leave her abuser.

The issue with many of these tactics is that, for a neurodivergent woman, they collide with the traits of her disorder. For women who are forgetful or easily distracted, having someone else control their finances is a dream come true because they don't have to worry about forgetting to pay bills on time or set aside money for taxes. When their partner offers to do that for them, it seems helpful rather than dangerous and controlling. Many women who experience anxiety or depression will self-isolate to try and cope with their feelings and the constant overwhelm of daily interactions and tasks. Having a partner who encourages them to stay home, cancel plans, not answer the phone, and avoid social situations seems like a perfect match to what their brains are already telling them to do.

According to the NCADV, women with mental illnesses and other disabilities in the US experience IPV and twice the rate of other populations.<sup>22</sup> Approximately 87% of women with SMI and other disabilities who rely on their intimate partner experience emotional abuse; while 50% experience physical abuse.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, "People with Disabilities and Domestic Violence," 2022, [https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/people\\_with\\_disabilities.pdf](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/people_with_disabilities.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

## *Eyes so Blue*

I'm eighteen and it's the first week of the fall semester at the local community college. At Intro to Art, I save a seat in the front row for a friend from dance class who's running late. I pull out my green notebook and arrange it and my highlighters on the table in front of me. I open the book to a blank page and start doodling. I have been excited for this class since I registered but now that it's here, I'm nervous it won't live up to the hype in my head.

My hand flies across the page in familiar swirls of a flower that I once saw in a Dutch art exhibit and have been copying for years. I'm drawing the last leaf when the table shifts, causing my markers to roll, one falling to the ground. My heart races and I can hear my pulse in my ears as I pray that no one saw that. I don't want to risk picking them up now and drawing attention, and I will *not* have a panic attack the first day of class.

A young man's voice has me finally looking up into a pair of ocean blue eyes. The world jumps into focus as my head clears and I notice a nerdy-looking guy holding out my highlighter. He apologizes for bumping the table, but I don't hear my reply as the teacher breezes past in a cloud of skirts and a slamming door on her heels. He takes the empty seat beside me, and before I can protest, the teacher begins introducing herself to the class.

The rest of the class is a blur of notes and drawing, and I am so engrossed that I hardly notice the time passing. I open my phone to a text from my friend saying he's missing class. *I could have figured that out myself*, I think sarcastically and sigh. The boy

stretches his hand out like he's expecting me to give him my phone, a cocky smirk on his face. I'm possessed, because I hand my phone over and he puts his number in it before handing it back with a grin.

He takes me out the next week. He texts and tells me where we're going and what to wear. We have a nice dinner in town, and he opens doors for me like a gentleman and orders for me. He completely takes away the stress of being in a new place and having to try to make choices. We end up talking for hours, long after we finish eating. We compare our wish lists —what we want out of our lives —noting that we want a lot of the same things: to finish college, get married, have three kids and two dogs, and live close to family.

As the months go by, he talks about how he'd make a great dad and says that even though college is important, he wishes we already had kids to love. I laugh every time, happy that he's so excited for our future and that I'll finally get a family. He calls me "cute" when I remind him that school comes first right now. We have a game night with his friends twice a week, and I finally feel included and part of something. His friends accept me into the fold so seamlessly it's like I was always there. Their girlfriends and I joke about having kids at the same time so our kids can be friends too and we can all hang out. I've never had this type of camaraderie or people who care so much.

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"Can you please come over," I beg. My voice sounds desperate and catches at the end. I know he'll be here any minute, this was such an important thing to him. All he ever talks about now is being a dad.

"I can't."

“What?”

“I can’t tonight,” he pauses, drawing in a long breath like he’s taking his time to figure out how to handle my request. “My parents are already asleep.” He says this as if it’s supposed to make sense.

“I can’t drive like this,” I whisper as loud as I can into the phone. “I am laying on the damn floor because it hurts so bad. Will you please just come be with me?”

“Listen. I told you I can’t get out tonight, and I told you why, so can you please stop being so dramatic right now?” He waits a breath before pushing on, his tone changing from gentle and patient to mildly annoyed. “You’re only like seven or eight weeks along anyway; it can’t be as bad as you’re making it out to be. It’s probably your own damn fault anyway.” I sit stunned, gripping the phone until my knuckles turn white.

He goes on, his voice softer, “I’ll see you Sunday, baby. You’ll be fine by then, and if not just stay home.” I can hear him power on his X-box from the other end of the call. “No need to bother the boys with this. It’s not something they’d be okay hearing about anyway.” He says goodbye and hangs up without me saying a single word in reply, the phone screen turning black in my hand.

He goes out with our friends the next day and tells them I’ve got food poisoning. I spend the day curled up in my room with a heating pad and a notebook. I send him my poem telling him how I feel about losing our baby—guilty, heartbroken, relieved, and guilty for feeling relieved. He replies with his own a few hours later that’s just as broken.

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After a few days I go to the hospital with a high fever and mind-numbing pain. I drive myself because he is at work and can’t take off. At the hospital they say I have an

infection from an incomplete miscarriage. The nurse is so kind and she holds my hand as she explains what is happening to my body. She tells me I should have gone to the doctor as soon as I knew what was happening to make sure everything passed properly. I nod my head even though I know there was no way I could have driven myself anywhere that night. The nurse buys me a small stuffed bear from the hospital gift shop, and I cry on her shoulder. She's the only person who knows what has happened aside from my boyfriend. I get home that afternoon and don't tell him where I was.

As the months go by, I feel so disillusioned by the part I'm playing as the sweet girlfriend, Bible School leader, and teacher. I feel like a fake. He hasn't let me tell anyone about the miscarriage because he doesn't want his church friends or pastor to find out. I ask him if I can reach out to our old pastor for counseling and he agrees, but only if he can go with me. The pastor never gets back to me, and when I see him in person I'm never alone. My family would be furious and disappointed, his family would be hurt and disappointed, so I have no one to turn to. I've dealt with depression before, but this feels different. It feels so much stronger, and it overpowers me. My sister has to talk me out of suicide multiple times that year.

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Two years later I found out he told our friends I had an abortion and killed his hope of being a father. It finally explains why I stopped getting invited to game nights and Sunday lunches. He told this to my boss and our pastor as well. That's fine. I don't believe in God anymore and the church job didn't pay well enough to cry over. At least this is what I tell myself every time I go home to visit family and see people who knew me back then. I still get nasty glances in the grocery store a decade later.

## August

I loved you as soon as you existed  
A swelling in my breast burst and breathed its last.  
Tongues of heat rushed to my brain  
My vision blurred, my cheeks went red.  
I cradled you in my heart and my hand  
A desperate cry, a silent prayer with no direction or end.

A head made of stone drooped to the ground,  
The weight of it all too heavy  
For a neck made of flesh to carry around.  
My heart became larger but filled with death and decay  
An unspoken promise of hope fell away.

Unable to think much less speak it out loud  
Bloody hands reached out for help  
Watching a light in my eyes slip away  
Unable to fake a smile, is he as torn as me?  
A mind on the railing of pain and relief  
Unsure where to go to express this type of grief.

A heart cry in need,



Begging God please,  
For just one last moment  
Let this not be me.  
A whisper of doubt  
Planted seeds of defeat  
Head filled with visions  
Of a life not meant to be.

## August Reprise

I gained and lost everything all in one moment  
A tragedy so abrupt I had no time to lament  
A part of me that was never meant to be died away  
I can't see what was worse to me  
That it died or was ever there in the first place  
Little more than my self-aborrence  
Can cure my despair.

A broken heart and tattered mind  
My self-drowning in cold water  
Gotta try not to let this define  
What makes a good father.

This is not us.  
This will not make us.  
I will not tell the world  
That broken hearts drove us apart.  
It changed us, rearranged us.  
We will grow and bloom just like we have from the start.

## Better

It burns down my throat  
Like hard liquor, no chaser  
It's hard to swallow it down  
Each breath rougher than the last

I know he can do so much better than me  
And he knows it too  
But love is strange  
It doesn't work like it should  
It doesn't release its hold when it needs to

He can do better  
But he still endured my touch with eyes half shut  
His pulse pounding as he takes his pound of flesh  
It's my punishment  
He will hold me until my heart breaks  
And I can't tell if that makes it worse, or better  
If he's compassionate or indifferent, like a god

## **A Bitter Taste**

I feel I'm being used

Love is simply currency

Doubting every word

Is anything true that you say to me

Promises so sweet

No sound on earth I'd rather hear

A false sense of hope I'm given

Tangled in a web of false security

I fear your words.

You lure me in and drown my fears in honey

I'm suffocated by what's too good to be true

I'm no longer writing poetry

I'm writing my obituary

I have drowned in your words

And suffered in pleasure

My fighting occurs only in silence

Around you though, there's no space for quiet

Too wounded to fully trust and too naive to push you away

A constant ache in my mouth

If I could just shut up and feel

## **Addiction**

I wish I were capable of hurting you

But to me you were the sweetest high

And the most terrible pain.

And I wish I could put you through that

But apparently, I'm only capable of hurting myself

Because I chose you. I defended you.

I supported you; I loved you,

And I still do.

And that's what makes me hate you the most.

Because I gave you everything I deserved.

You got all the good

I saved nothing for myself.

And I would do it all again

Because that's what you're supposed to do

With someone you love.

And I never want to lose the ability to give it all

But I can't give anything when I'm this empty.

And since you gave nothing back

Who's going to fill me up?

## Three Weeks

It's crazy but I felt more in three weeks  
Than in three years,  
And I try to hate you, but I can't change the way I feel.  
And I know you're done now  
But I don't know how to move on.  
And the second I see you  
I know I'll feel it like a knife to my heart  
And I'll be back at it with a knife upon my arm.  
Really, what's one more scar?  
And what's one more doused light  
In a set of eyes that has already gone dark?  
  
I know this guy who could take you off my mind.  
He says he could make me lose my head  
With his hands all on my skin,  
But even thinking about someone else in that way  
Feels like a sin.  
After all this time the pain is still sinking in.  
I want to live my life and I want to feel some joy  
But I can't trust anyone else  
Without remembering how you played with me like a toy.

I don't know about you, but I gave my all

You held my heart inside your hand

And simply watched me fall.

Maybe I wasn't good enough, and maybe love is blind

Because I never saw the distance behind your eyes.

I'm glad I didn't tell you how much you mean to me.

Those words are vicious, and unrequited.

They would have been the death of me.

You say you didn't mean to hurt me,

And I know you used to care

But none of that matters now,

Because now you're never there.

From the distance in your words

I wonder if any of it was ever real.

## **A Portrait of Despair**

I know you like the back of my hand.

Not sure what went wrong.

It's like walking on quicksand

With a sinking feeling in my mind.

I can't remember which misstep I made

In our little game

That pushed you so far away.

Hard getting over myself

When I'm all I can talk to

No friends to speak to—

I've traded them all for you.

I know you crave my warmth

Just a touch is all you need

But you flinch from my fingers.

A mental bruise you've suffered from my hands

Which brings me back to the quicksand

And a portrait of despair.



## A Broken Promise

I made my choice; I stood right there,

Unquestioning unwavering.

What I didn't see was that it was all going downhill.

You put everything before me

And in the end, I'm left with what I let go.

Everything I gave up and gave away,

That's just going to come back to me?

The choices I made to keep you

To prove my love (no, you didn't ask)

Turned me into a person I can't stand

A person that I'm just not.

I can't decide how to let go of these lies;

Take off the mask and show all the dirt and all the shame I've tried to hide.

I can't even blame you—

No, my own choices laid me low.

With or without you I'll have to learn how to live with me somehow.

I sit in my grave screaming your name

But you stand over me mourning how you've lost another.

How could I be so selfish to just let go?

But it's not about you, you know?

I've lost more than one life waiting for you.

I'm sorry and I'm selfish, I know.

How could I do this?

But you're clueless,

Because as I'm writing this I've already let go.

You have no motivation or ambition

But that's just how this goes.

I'll be the one with the brains left behind in the kitchen;

I'll be sitting at home, all that learning truly worthless.

While you'll be out earning bank, I'll be living off a pension,

Grateful for whatever you dole out.

I'll be dressing everyone

While wearing my own soul out.

## Chapter 4: Healing

The thing about healing is they never tell you how messy it can be. Healing is a violent process. It is not linear; it is not a clean break or an instant change. We are asked all the time, “Why didn’t you leave earlier?” People question the timeline and thought process of survivors of abuse, as if they could ever understand without having walked in our shoes. Leaving takes time and planning. We have to hoard resources and squirrel away cash and birth certificates and passports. When people ask why we didn’t leave when we first realized how bad it was, we have to explain that it wasn’t bad from the beginning. At the start it felt fresh, calming, and reassuring; we felt safe. An abuser doesn’t dunk you in boiling water; he waits for you to get comfortable in the pot before slowly turning the heat up and boiling you alive. By the time you realize what is happening, it’s too late to get out safely; you get out however you can.

Between 2000 and 2002, 96% of those convicted of domestic violence offenses were male and 78% of the victims were an adult female within the family.<sup>24</sup> The Violence Policy Center (VPC) notes that since 2011, 65% of all US murder-suicides involve an intimate partner, and in 95% of these cases, the man killed his wife or girlfriend.<sup>25</sup> With these cases, the murder-suicide occurred in the home 81% of the time.<sup>26</sup> The VPC states that “such events are commonly the result of a breakdown in the

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<sup>24</sup> US Department of Justice, “Family Violence Statistics: Including Statistics on Strangers and Acquaintances,” *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, (June 2005): 2-3.

<sup>25</sup> Violence Policy Center, “American Roulette: Murder Suicide in the United States, 7th ed.,” *Violence Policy Center* (July 2020): 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

relationship” between the man and his female partner.<sup>27</sup> For a woman trying to leave an abusive situation, a “breakdown in the relationship” is inevitable. Leaving is rarely safe for a woman experiencing IPV.

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<sup>27</sup> Violence Policy Center, “American Roulette: Murder Suicide in the United States, 4th ed.,” *Violence Policy Center* (May 2012): 5.

*Dear Maria*

My mother married for noble reasons—she wanted to give her kids a safe home to grow up in, to give them a father. She read all the statistics about single-parent households and the dangers for children raised in one. She wanted better for her kids. Better came in the form of her older boyfriend Patrick. He treated her like a goddess and doted on her children constantly.

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Summer is finally here and it's brought storms with it. I'm done with first grade, and my sisters and I have been playing at home all day. The baby is too young to do much, but Rhea and I dress her up and dance with her in the playroom. Dad stays in the garage working on one of his projects. It's been rainy all day, making it nice and cool. The thunder scares the baby as we eat dinner, which is silly because she listens to thunder all night long on her rain machine. Rhea and I tuck the baby in and stand there looking at her for a moment because she's so adorable. We both go to bed, but I have trouble sleeping.

Down the hallway the light shines through the cracks in the door of Mom and Dad's room. Mom's still out, working late closing an account that her boss gave her. She's such a hard worker and all her customers love her. Dad must be watching a war documentary because the quiet echoes of cannons and gunfire sound from behind the door. My sisters are already asleep in their room, but I want to stay up to see Mom when she gets home. I decide to make Pop-Tarts in the meantime. I pull out the kitchen stool

and grab the box from the pantry. I make sure the bedroom door is closed before I turn the toaster on so Dad won't hear when it goes off.

When the pastries are done, I put up the stool and throw the wrapper away. The trash can holds empty beer bottles, and I hold my breath as I look toward the bedroom door again. It's still closed so I creep back to my bedroom to wait for Mom. I finish the Pop-Tarts and lick my fingers clean. The garage door opens. I get up to go see Mom but stop when the door to their room bursts open and Dad stomps out to the kitchen.

He meets Mom as she comes inside and sets her keys on the counter by the phone. She sighs loudly at what Dad says and sits on a stool at the island. She rubs her temples as he towers over her. When she answers him, his face turns bright red. He shoves the fruit bowl off the counter with one swipe, and it crashes to the ground and shatters against the tile. Mom gets up and grabs the broom from the pantry. She puts her hand on his chest to move him out of the way. The broom clatters to the floor as Dad grabs her by the throat and shoves her against the fridge, magnets and papers fluttering.

She's yelling at him to put her down, but he smacks her across the face and tells her to shut up. He throws her to the floor, the corner of the island hitting her head on the way down. The baby is crying down the hall and Dad stops moving on top of her as he looks my way. He gets up and starts toward the nursery as Mom scrambles behind him to grab the phone off the island. Dad hears her and spins around, his eyes glassy. He rushes at her like a mad dog. He grabs her wrist and she screams in pain, blood running down her forehead and from her busted lip. Yelling, he snatches the phone from her hand and brings it down on the counter over and over until pieces fly off.

Mom pushes him against the sink and runs over to me. She swings open the door to the nursery, hands me the squalling baby, and grabs Rhea from her bed. She pushes me out of the bedroom and towards the garage door, each of us holding onto one of the girls. Mom's hand abruptly leaves my shoulder as she cries out in pain. By the time I turn around, Dad is standing over her, his hands clenched into fists as she's on her knees clutching a squirming Rhea. Rhea scrambles away, and Mom hurls her entire body at Dad's legs, knocking him to the floor. Rhea and I run to the garage and Mom grabs the keys from the counter. We get in the car and Mom locks the doors as she waits for the garage door to slowly roll out of the way.

The door to the house flies open and a hand slaps the button. The garage door stops and Dad stumbles out. Mom slams the car in reverse forcing it down the driveway and onto the road. I buckle the baby in her car seat as we speed away. The rain has finally quit. We only stop driving when blue lights flash behind us.

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We stayed with our grandparents for a few weeks while our mom Maria worked with the police. It was a struggle. She had to leave all our papers and records. Her money, clothes, and jewelry were still at the house. When she went back with the police to grab stuff, her birth certificate, medical records, and social security card had disappeared. Patrick didn't go to prison. He didn't even go to jail. He said Maria was verbally abusive and had hit him that night and kidnaped his daughter. She lost custody of all of us, and she never got Rhea and I back. I haven't seen Rhea in almost twenty years.

## Nothing's Wrong

Nothing's wrong anymore

And that's the issue.

If something were wrong

It would make sense

For me to be running down the street

Blood running down my arms

And tears run down my face.

If something were wrong

I wouldn't feel so ashamed.

Every second that I'm begging

For someone, anyone to see me

To save me, please help!

I'm begging.

But there's nothing wrong anymore.

The scars and bruises are healed.

They're not visible anymore.

And so, I don't break down at 3 AM.

I can't be manic and scream and sob

At the injustice of a world that I'm no longer living in



Because I made it out;  
I'm one of the lucky ones.  
But I don't feel lucky.  
My screams are trapped now  
Behind a wall of polished stone  
And my blood won't fall  
Because it would stain the white carpet  
Of the new house I built,  
And we can't have that now,  
Can we?

## Pity

I'm tired of you reminiscing on all the things we used to have

Because it's not painful and it's not hurtful to me,

It just makes you look sad.

It's done, it's over.

I'm just trying to move on.

But it's hard to dance to my own beat

When I keep hearing your stupid song.

And a Rose by any other name would smell as sweet

But all your words are bitter

And all I'm tasting is stale wine between my teeth.

And when I think about it

I'm okay that I didn't get to make you a dad

Because you're really bad, really awful

At loving what you have.

And when I was falling hard

You just let me crash,

And I don't think that's the kind of peace of mind

That I can ever truly get back.

Because my heart was broken  
And my soul was a wreck  
And then you were right back at it  
Only using me for sex.

And now that our dirty laundry is being aired  
You never let me grieve.  
And after that first week it seemed like you just didn't care.  
I was still bleeding, and you couldn't bother to be there.  
That was the first time I wanted to disappear.

I'm not going to put myself in your shoes  
'Cause you never once walked in mine.  
I'm saying this for me—  
It's hard to be okay and it's hard to be fine  
When your body is a graveyard  
And your lover's jokes have no line.

## Waiting 'till Daylight

I am lonely,  
not often alone;  
Only in the still of the night do I find myself with  
Solely myself for company.  
Clarity comes in solitude,  
Astounding flashes that make it hard to sleep.  
I have *never* been alone.  
I have not had the quiet necessary to know myself.  
My waking hours are filled with  
Work and inspiration and love and people all around me.  
I pour from a constantly emptying cup.  
But my solitude is nothing peaceful, I'm afraid.  
Do I only help, do I only love  
To fill my own cup?  
Does my work only truly benefit me?  
And am I so selfish that I don't see it in the daylight?  
I should wait for daylight to question my motives.

## **I'm Trying to be Strong**

But what if strong  
Is knowing your limits  
And taking care of yourself?

What if strong  
Is knowing how far you can bend  
Without letting yourself break?

What if strong  
Is saying *I can't* and *I'm done*  
So you can preserve what's left?

Is it a failure to let go?  
If giving up something means finding my peace  
Is that weakness?

## **Break Me**

It's okay, you can go.

Live the life you've been searching for.

I'll stay together, I won't fall apart.

Don't think you're the first one

To break my heart.

It's okay, yeah, it's fine.

I'll just re-wrap the bandages around me until they're tight.

The last one left me with broken bones,

A shattered soul, and a heart made of stone.

But I've been toughening up.

I'm not flesh anymore,

I've traded that away for something far less warm.

When you leave with a lie on your tongue,

Don't worry about me, I'm already quite numb.

The ice in my chest has now reached my spine:

Don't fear breaking me,

I'm far less fragile this time.

## Skin

You taught me to love things about myself  
That you later grew to disdain.  
You taught me to love myself and I grew happy  
In my own skin.  
I grew to love the stripes and scars  
Even the bumps and bruises.  
But once I grew to love myself,  
You realized that I loved me more than you ever did.  
You tried to tear down the confidence  
That you once told me I deserved.  
  
You're wrong though.  
Even if I don't have enough love for myself,  
I have enough spite for you  
To treat me better than you ever could.

## Truth

My body is innocent.

She didn't do anything to deserve

This hatred that I've gifted her.

She is innocent and clean and good

And all the things that women are told

They were meant to be.

She holds me upright and

Lets me climb mountains,

Dive into deep waters,

Paddle through wild currents,

And ride down winding roads.

She lets me push my niece on a swing,

Text my best friend,

Cook dinner with my sister,

Read books in the sun,

And take care of my plants.

She makes amazing hot chocolate

And she gives amazing hugs.



She bakes for friends and  
Writes dozens of Christmas cards every year.

My body is not the things that have been done to her.

She is the strength that got through the pain

And the promise that if I give her time —

She will recreate herself into something new

That has never been touched or seen.

A body and spirit that is just for me.

## Resources for Victims

Leaving an abusive partner is never easy, but it is not impossible. Genesis House has created a list for victims and survivors to refer to when leaving an abusive relationship. When planning to leave an abuser, it is a good idea to make copies of your important documents and store them away from the home to keep a small supply of emergency cash on you, as well as change for pay phones or public transportation. Create a mental list of safe people like co-workers and acquaintances whom you could turn to in an emergency. Provide them with a codeword that, if used, lets them know you are in danger. Finally, turn off the location of your phone, social media accounts, tablets, e-readers, and computers.<sup>28</sup>

Once out of an abusive relationship, it may be difficult and frightening to figure out where to go next. Distance from family and close friends is often a hindrance to victims when they think about leaving. DomesticShelters.org has a tool that allows victims to input their ZIP code and find domestic violence shelters near them. For victims with pets, many shelters only accept service animals, not family pets. In the past few years, advocacy groups realized that many victims refuse to leave their animals.<sup>29</sup> The SAF-T program was created to provide shelter to victims *and* their pets; it offers a state-by-state list of pet-friendly shelters across the US.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Genesis House, "Getting Help," accessed 12 October 2023, <https://genesishouseinc.com/getting-help/>.

<sup>29</sup> Sheltering Animals and Families Together, "Home," Accessed 12 October 2023, <https://saftprogram.org/>.

<sup>30</sup> Sheltering Animals and Families Together, "Pet-Friendly Domestic Violence Shelters," accessed 12 October 2023, <https://saftprogram.org/pet-friendly-domestic-violence-shelters/>.

For survivors of sexual assault, the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) provides access to advocates in each state, as well as connections to medical and legal resources.<sup>31</sup> Reporting IPV is a personal journey that not everyone decides to take. Reporting SA may be the first step some take to get justice; however, many women decide to focus on their own healing first. While it seems like everyone on the outside has an opinion on what a victim should do, the best way to help is to support her in her decisions.

### **Victim Resources**

- National Sexual Assault Hotline number: 1-800-656-4673
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233
- Gensis House: 1-800-707-5197
- A state-by-state list of US domestic violence shelters that accept family pets: <https://saftprogram.org/pet-friendly-domestic-violence-shelters/>
- Resources after sexual assault: <https://www.rainn.org/articles/steps-you-can-take-after-sexual-assault>

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<sup>31</sup> Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, "Programs & Expertise," accessed 12 October 2023, <https://rainn.org/programs-and-expertise>.

## Conclusion

In the beginning, I was expecting this project to be largely academic and research-based. I thought I could distance myself from the work and ideas that I was so passionate about. Re-structuring this thesis as a creative project effectively forced me out of my comfort zone. It demanded that I take an introspective look into my own coping methods and the narrative I had been telling myself for years. I conducted familial interviews that brought me to tears with both frustration and sorrow.

As a researcher, I could remain an opinionated observer. As a survivor, I had to confront hard truths and statistics that often made me feel like a number on a page. I had to realize that without the impersonal numbers and indifferent research, many government and state allocations toward programs and resources for victims would not exist. I used to hate the idea of being a statistic, but after all my research, I see that those statistics save lives. The dispassionate number and the loud, violent advocacy go hand in hand to raise awareness for victims and survivors and provide them with the help they need to get away from IPV, as well as the care and stability they need to stay away.

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