

ON VULNERABILITY

Lately I've been noticing, in porn, which actor undresses first. I'm not sure when I started noticing this or even why it has come to interest me. Each time the first actor strips, I watch as his face displays how powerful he is feeling. Powerful in, I assume, his confidence to show himself first. And then, as his co-star watches, powerful in the way he exudes sovereignty over the room, as if saying, "Because I'm the first to get naked, I now have the power to curate this scene." Power in nakedness and, at the same time, power in vulnerability.

I think the same can be said for poetry. The first to strip is the poet and the second, the one who watches, the reader.

When I visited my friend's class to talk about my chapbook, one of her students asked how I was able to write about my experiences with sexual abuse so openly, so vulnerably. There I was, having stripped first, and I had no idea why stripping first gave me such strength. I was not aware until that moment that many people were unable to write openly without remorse. Of course, not everyone writes from a place of vulnerability; poetry is constructed using devices that beautify and veil. I don't remember my answer to the student. I do remember stumbling over my words, though, trying to give language to this assumption I'd had. How do people, poets, write vulnerably? Who did I learn this from? Is it possible to teach?

I turn to black women in poetry, here: Lucille Clifton, CM Burroughs, Toi Derricotte, Aricka Foreman, r. erica doyle, Safia Elhillo, Nicole Sealey, Natasha Trethewey, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ai, Vievee Francis, Thylia Moss, Camille T. Dungy, Morgan Parker, Rita Dove, Camonghne Felix—this list goes on forever.

I turn to this poem by Britteney Black Rose Kapri that has been on my mind for a few months now:

reasons imma Hoe

i fucked someone else. i was walking. he asked a question he didn't want the answer to. her man finds me attractive. she doesn't find herself attractive. the internet. a woman in church didn't like that i walked like a

grown woman. i was switching. i grew hips too young. my friends. i got on the wrong train car. i grew breasts too young. i distracted the boys from their schoolwork by showing my shoulders. by showing my thighs. by showing up. i loved a woman. i touched a woman. i left a woman. i fucked more people than him. he didn't teach me that thing he liked. i didn't like that thing he likes. i didn't wait for him. i didn't smile for him. i smiled at another him. i carried condoms. i let him fuck me without a condom. i said no. i said yes. i spoke. i didn't bleed. i did exactly what he asked me to. i told him that shit was weird. i blocked him. i fucked her man. i was breathing.

What I admire most about this poem is what I'm calling the "raving I," which I borrowed from the poem "Raving: I" by CM Burroughs. The "I" propels this poem forward in an almost uncomfortable way. We are forced to keep going even if we haven't completely digested what we've just read. This happens right from the beginning: "i fucked someone else. i was walking. he asked a question he didn't want the answer to." There's no time to stop. By this same mechanism, the speaker is exposed. Each sentence, as it propels us forward, is declarative. Notice that there aren't any metaphors in the poem. There is no move to "poeticize" the language. With no metaphors, the speaker is onstage by themselves. They're unable to hide behind pretty language or fancy rhetorical moves—except for the list-like propulsion of the "I." The speaker is naked, completely stripped. And yet, while there's some self-shame—"i grew hips too young," "i grew breasts too young"—there's confidence in this speaker too, right? It could be because the speaker is concentrating their thoughts (even though some thoughts are fragmented) on themselves. It could also be because there isn't any movement to dissociate themselves from their experiences by including metaphors (or even imagery). When we get to the end, "i was breathing," we start to breathe. Not only were we immersed in this person's experience, but we were watching them strip. In "i was breathing," then, we see them stripped down completely, as if to say, "I have nothing left but this body."

The confidence and power of the poem's speaker are enacted by the way the poem is curated. Since most of the poem uses the "I" to start each thought, the reader can't control how they move through each encounter. The speaker creates the authority to steer the reader by being completely vulnerable about their experiences. Notice, too, that the poem isn't lineated—it's a prose block, which adds to the momentum of the poem. It also eliminates misconceptions about what is being said. Say, if the poem were lineated as such—

i fucked
 someone else. i was
 walking. he asked
 a question. he didn't
 want the answer
 to. her man finds me
 attractive. the internet.

—the poem, then, would be less about the power of the speaker to push us forward, and more about the anxiety and brokenness of that speaker. Power in vulnerability would not be foregrounded. Lineation is still curation, that's for sure, and may be the ultimate form of curation for literature, but I think it's necessary to also look at what is lost in lineation. Are we more tempted to slow down or speed up when reading lineated poems as opposed to prose poems? Which form tells the better story? Which is more vulnerable? For this poem, the prose block wins out. There isn't anything the speaker can hide inside—not metaphors, not line breaks. It's just the speaker and the reader; the first to strip and the one who watches.

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Okay, I'm usually the first to strip before having sex. I like being naked. It gives me breath. I also, if I'm being honest, like being ogled. In this way, I hold the power. I have the power to say what happens next. I have the power to hold his attention, if even for a few seconds. At the same time, I'm completely vulnerable. At any moment in the immediacy of my nakedness, he can cause harm to my body. If he wished to do harm, he could catalog every place—he could enact it.

In that case, why do I feel power in my nakedness? Can I truly curate what happens after I undress? Vulnerability can give one strength, but also creates a space for the unknown. So, is there power in the unknown? Is being vulnerable in tangent with the unknown? I don't turn to poetry to answer these questions, but rather for the interrogation itself—and to try to understand the human experience. “mercy,” by Lucille Clifton, for example, is a poem that draws its complexity from reflection and intimacy—or, more simply put, that human experience:

mercy

how grateful I was when he decided
 not to replace his fingers with his thing
 though he thought about it was going to
 but mumbled “maybe I shouldn't do that”
 and didn't do that and I was so
 grateful then and now grateful
 how sick i am how mad

In Clifton's poem, the unknown is what could have happened, both psychologically and physically, to the speaker if the “he” hadn't changed his mind. This unknown makes us uncomfortable. The moment when the “he” changes his mind makes me uncomfortable, too. But for me this moment, while painful, is also tender. And even though it makes me uncomfortable to think of him this way, the “he” is human. That the speaker is, at first, content to describe one violence over the other is also discomfiting. This contentedness reveals a vulnerability in the speaker; it allows us to judge them: Is violence not violence no matter the degree? How can you choose one over the other?

To find the power in vulnerability in this poem, I look to the end: the reflection. This reflection is twofold. On one hand, the power dwells in the speaker's ability to reflect on the experience at all. The speaker didn't die—physically at least—and is able to recall their experience and offer their thoughts. On the other hand, notice the decapitalization of the I in the last line. This decapitalization could mean that, while the speaker is able to reflect on their experience, they are diminished by it, a slave to it, they cannot escape it. This diminishment exposes the speaker. It, along with the experience itself, makes them mad.

And we can't forget the title, which nudges us in the direction of this conversation about power: mercy is having the power to cause harm but not using it. Here, the abuser is the one who holds the power for most of the poem. He has the power to manipulate the speaker's experience of their abuse. His “mercy” is the second thought: “maybe I shouldn't do that.” In his mercy, the speaker is vulnerable, powerless to control what will happen next. In their vulnerability, they are grateful for his mercy. This reminds me of how Christianity sometimes explains our relationship with God. A “merciful God” is something I grew up hearing about in church—God is merciful because he has

the power to inflict harm (like he does all throughout the Old Testament), but decides against it. But if we are always powerless to an almighty being, always vulnerable, how do we find the strength to keep moving, keep living? Where is our power?

The answers to these questions evade me, at least within the scope of the Clifton poem. I still believe there's some power in the ability to reflect. Poetry is a form of reflection and control. The poet can manipulate the reader's thinking simply by creating an uncomfortable world inhabited by vulnerable people, as Clifton does in this poem. The poet is God and we, the readers, are her followers...

Where are the metaphors in this poem? There are none. The speaker is exposed...

Are metaphors clothes?

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Here's a poem by Vievee Francis:

Taking It

for Gabby and Jen

I never remember the knuckles, though
 his hand was bare, though their hands were bare.
 I remember the impressions left on *this* skin, the
 wilting and the welting. I don't remember the sound,
 not one smack. I remember the falls, myself falling
 to the floor or sidewalk, or against the brick wall
 my head met after a push. There were many pushes.
 Girls pushed but I punched. Pulled one
 down by the hair and kneed her as my head bled.
 Girls didn't punch until high school. I had always
 punched. *What kind of girl are you?*
 the kind who wants to live, I said, and I did want to
 until I didn't anymore. But I wanted the leaving
 to be on my terms, so I hit my father back.
 He owned me like any good, country father. He
 waited for a husband to tame what he couldn't corral,

to throw a rope like fingers 'round a neck.
 When I missed a boy, fingerholds—I remember those,
 and me making a fist wrongly, and punching
 and I didn't mean to miss but to hit the line below the belly,
 the beltline. *W— —* broke me in the snow
 my first year North. I'm still afraid to say his name.
 I wore shoes too thin for the weather (who had ever seen
 such snow?) and had a Georgia lilt, like molasses
 on a sore throat, sugared, raw, and he hated the sound of it.
 He was black and I was black and I was so happy
 to be in Detroit, and he aimed for my heart-
 shaped mouth, my gapped teeth, my too-sweet tongue.
 I felt the juvenile weight of him above me like snow after dark
 falling steady and hard. *I'm gone teach you to talk reg'lar,*
 and I stopped speaking at all. I kept my swollen mouth shut,
 and a straight razor in my math book, and dreamt of a bat
 cracking against his chest. A woman like me
 with soft hands, not hands of the field, but
 hands meant to stroke and soothe, needs a weapon,
 so I studied *The Art of War* and watched boxing, and
 where else was all this rage to go? Is this too dramatic?
 Find another story. Find a lie. In love, body after body
 fell beneath my own, though my own was broken,
 and I made love like a sea creature, fluid as if boneless,
 though my bones would rattle if not for the fat I cherish.
 Wouldn't you? And I grew to love the heavyweights,
 myself with one in the ring. Imagine him punching
 me, and punching me again, saying I'm sorry, so sorry,
 to have to love you like this.

The title, "Taking It," announces the psychology of the poem. "Taking it" translates to "take it like a man" or "toughen up" or even "don't let it bother you." The speaker is literally "taking it" in this poem—but they're giving it, too. There's violence constantly happening—"Girls pushed but I punched. Pulled one/down by the hair and kneed her as my head bled"—even as the speaker is stripping themselves naked for us, the reader. What gives this speaker power is what makes the speaker vulnerable: violence and abuse. They adopt and adapt. What really takes me, though, is that even while the speaker is powerful, they are often silent, like in this moment:

W— — broke me in the snow
my first year North. I'm still afraid to say his name.

or this one:

I felt the juvenile weight of him above me like snow after dark
falling steady and hard. *I'm gone teach you to talk reg'lar,*
and I stopped speaking at all.

There are more indirect moments when the speaker is silent, too:

I never remember the knuckles

And at the end where we are left with another's voice:

*I'm sorry, so sorry,
to have to love you this way.*

In all of these moments, we are reminded that while, yes, there's power in vulnerability, we're still, in fact, made vulnerable by it. There's still space for harm and for the unknown. In "Taking It," we have a speaker doing everything they can to reign as sovereign over the room, over their experiences— they're "the kind who wants to live," they insist, and they "wanted the leaving/to be on [their] terms." But at the end of the day, they are "sugared," "raw," with a "too-sweet tongue" and "hands meant to stroke and soothe." Not only that, but they're a speaker that consistently, through all the violence, believes in love. The line, "he was black and I was black and I was happy," speaks to their ideas about romance—"We're both black so it must be for the best." This gets complicated when the speaker says, "In love, body after body/fell beneath my own, though my own was broken." Here, the speaker acknowledges that, because of their experiences, they conflate love with violence. Directly before that, the speaker asks us to "find a lie" in the extremity of their rage—but we can also read it: "Find a lie. In love, body after body..." The phrase tells us exactly what the speaker feels: "Love is a lie." The end of the poem embodies this attitude; a silent speaker is told they can only be loved like "this."

Vulnerability in silence? Power in silence? I come back to God for this one who, throughout most of the Bible, is silent or who speaks through disciples. Remaining silent, say, while others are asking questions or praying for answers is a way to hold onto power. You have the information they seek and knowledge

is power, after all. Think about it like this: when having sex, the top (the one penetrating) asks the bottom (the one penetrated), "Do you like it?" and doesn't receive an answer. Who holds the power? Even though they're the one being penetrated, the bottom does. He has something the top desires.

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When he's done stripping naked, after having watched me do so, I don't have much to say. I look at his body and ask myself where to put my hands, my lips, and move as my hunger moves me. I can't say for sure where this power in nakedness comes from, but maybe that's the point of vulnerability. To be vulnerable is to play with all these things—silence, curation, control—without the clarity of knowing what's next. Maybe, at last, it is the unknown that creates the tension between the first one stripped and the reader who, entering the room, has no idea where they'll end up. For a split second, there is only the moment that will happen next, and then the afterwards: "i was breathing," "i am how mad," "I'm so sorry to have to love you like this."