

Subjecting Myself

Addie Robertson

M'assujettir

Pour faciliter l'émergence d'un sujet au féminin, des femmes s'écrivent, se définissent. En m'assujettissant à une méditation retrospective ou je nomme et possède le passé qui m'a longtemps échappé, un passé troublé de beaucoup d'incidents violents, j'assume la responsabilité de moi-même et je crée l'avenir. Pour construire cette histoire qui est une transcription matérielle, concrète, et textuelle, j'alterne entre la première et la troisième personne. En se textualisant, ma subjectivité se concrétise, se réal-ise. Écrivant je, je deviens audible, visible. L'écriture d'une vie, la vie en écriture.

She lost her voice sometime around the year she turned 14.¹ It reappeared sporadically up until the time she was 18, and then it disappeared for good. By then she had developed a strategy for keeping a lid on all of her emotions: anger, fear, hurt, loneliness, happiness. But mostly anger and happiness. In her silence she forgot what they were. Around the year she turned 21 she found her voice. It was systematically and forever beaten out of her. She's had very little trouble keeping silent since.

The first time I got beaten up, I was 17 years old and having a huge argument with my sister, who, at that time, outweighed me by about 50 pounds and who was incredibly strong; stronger than many boys. It was a silly argument, but then, most of them are. And what made it even sillier was the fact that I was angry with my mother, not my sister. It was the only time I ever saw my sister lose her temper. I started the argument, and harassed her until she broke my arm and gave me a mild concussion. I was always impressed with the fact that she broke my arm with a single punch. Since no one was home, the two of us concocted a believable story to tell mom, since we both knew just how

she would react if she knew we had been fighting. The arm took over a year to heal.

The reason she first lost her voice is very similar to the reason she found it. It was beaten, cajoled and coerced into her. She grew up in a violent, alcoholic home that was not conducive to a happy, healthy childhood. Her Dad drank, her Mom was addicted to Valium and in her confusion and anger sporadically beat the children. She became a surrogate mother to her brothers and sister at the age of five. Mom was continually pregnant or drugged and just couldn't make it out of bed on most days, so she had to make sure the other children were dressed, fed and kept out of mom's way. Dad was never home and when he did come home, more often than not he was drunk. She learned not to complain, as that always caught a smack or two, she learned not to be happy since that too deserved a smack, she learned to read and anticipate everybody else's moods, and she learned that these kinds of things weren't spoken about. They didn't exist.

The second time I was beaten up was the first time I'd ever been hit by a man. I was 18 years old, angry, and as they say, I had the world by the tail. I went to a private girl's school for the last two years of high school, and near the end of the year we went on a graduation boat cruise. For some reason one of the boys, from another private school, took offence to my short hair and started haranguing me about being a communist, a lesbian, and a weirdo. In short, an offence to the sensibility of mankind. Not being one to take this sort of abuse from a stranger kindly, I attempted to reason with the young man. He responded by hitting me and then picking me up and throwing me across the deck of the boat. I landed on a row of chairs that were sitting at the back railing of the boat. I was more frightened and angry than hurt, but somewhat appalled that someone I didn't know would hit me. I assumed that I, like every other human being, had the right to look and act as I wanted to. He didn't think so and was later acquitted in court.

They always knew that when mom wasn't 'feeling well' and couldn't get out of bed, they had to look after themselves and then go play quietly outside. When dad came home at lunch time, they had to be clean, quiet and presentable. Her favorite lunch was grilled cheese

sandwiches and tomato soup, and because that was also her dad's favorite, they had it almost every day for lunch. She had no way of knowing at the time that they had little money for much of anything else. Often after lunch, when their dad had gone back to work, their mom would take them grocery shopping or window shopping, and, once a week, to the hairdresser's where she could drown out the kid's voices under the hairdryer.

They moved to Coquitlam when she was 5 years old. Her sister was 4, her brother was 3, and her other brother was yet to be born. She clearly remembers picking rocks and sticks up from the newly cleared property, and was cautioned daily not to step on the boards as there were nails in them that could go right through a little girl's foot. Being a child, she of course didn't always pay attention to where she was walking, and was duly surprised when one day a nail did go through her foot. She was punished for being so careless and for not listening to her mother. Carelessness became a method of defiance.

She also started kindergarten that year and got a clear indication of what the rest of her schooldays were going to be like, when a little boy behind her in line lifted up her skirt and exposed her favorite pink bloomers, the kind with lace all around the legs, for all the world to see. She doesn't remember much else from that year other than being terrified that someone was going to embarrass her again. She very rarely went near the monkey bars unless she had pants on and there weren't many other children around. She thinks learning to read and napping were her favorite parts of kindergarten.

She learned to read at a very early age, and not long after, immersed herself in the world of books. She decided not long after that, that she wanted to be a writer. She had a lot of respect for people who could create a world that she could escape to, and she desperately wanted to be able to create a world where other children like herself could run to in their time of need. She not only got her love from books, she devoted all of her love to the books she read, and by the time she was 8 or 9 she was a hard-core addict. She needed to have at least two books a day to survive, and she lost what little ability she had to interact socially with other children her own age.

I was harrassed all throughout elementary school and high school for being odd, being smart, being rich, and because the teachers liked me. I not only sat through all of my classes reading, but every spare minute I had, I read. By the time I reached junior high school, I was reading three or four books a day. In most of my classes the teachers thought that I was far more advanced than most of my classmates, so they sent me to the library to work on my own. I read and read and read. I learned to love being on my own, and began to isolate myself from all social situations. It seemed to me the easiest way of dealing with the trauma of being a teenager. I began to realize that I was very different from many of the other children that I knew.

Her father tried to take control of everybody's lives around the year she turned 16. He told her how to cut her hair, how to dress, how to attract a husband, and what kind of job she ought to get. He tried every means possible to talk her into working for him, as a means of keeping the family locked together forever. In many ways she rebelled, but in others conformed. She was going to go to university regardless of how long it took or how much money she had to find, but she would be a doctor and show him just how smart and successful she could be. Her hidden anger compelled her to fight, not only for herself, but for the rights that she knew she had. Somewhere. She proved to her father that she was a normal girl who could attract all kinds of boys by sleeping with all kinds of boys. Promiscuity became not only an act of rebellion, but as well a kind of reaffirmation that she was as worthless as her father told her she was, but that she was much better at it than he had ever imagined. It also confirmed to her that there was an alternative kind of lifestyle out there that had more to offer, if only she could get all the men out of the way. Her father never did believe that she was normal.

The third time I was beaten up was 'for real.' The other two times became practise rounds compared to this time, and I became aware for the first time that I was going to die, and it was going to be a lot sooner than I expected. I was 20 years old and had never experienced violence of this intensity. He was a kick boxer with a black belt in karate, and he and his friend were looking for a good time. I was getting into my car when he ran up to the car and grabbed the door. I

thought I could talk him out of it, but it wasn't in the cards. The first time he hit me I didn't understand what had happened. As the pain in my face began to enter into my consciousness, a sudden awareness came over me. Time came almost to a standstill and it slowly dawned on me that I had been punched. I screamed one short scream and grabbed the steering wheel of my car.

The second punch knocked me back into the present. The pain was unbearable, and even more so was the incredible fear and anger that I felt. They say that your life flashes before your eyes just before you die. For me it was more a sudden realization that I was going to die, and it was happening now, without my consent. Many years of frustration, and unbelievable anger boiled up inside of me, and in a matter of seconds it all came out. I grabbed the steering wheel with all of the inhuman strength I could muster, and I screamed. And screamed and screamed. I couldn't be stopped. I knew that since I was going to die, I was going to do it loudly. They would know that I didn't give in without a fight. The man's friend ran from the alley to his car, and the man that was hitting me grabbed me and tore me out of the car, kicking and screaming. He yelled that he was going to kill me, so I curled up into a ball, trying to protect my face from being hit one more time. Before I knew it, I was being pulled out from underneath my car, still screaming. I struggled and screamed as my friend yelled at me to stop screaming. He had been across the street where I had dropped him off, and came running at the first sound of my screaming. The whole incident had taken less than three or four minutes. As he held me and tried to comfort me, the police drove by and twenty or so witnesses gathered around to offer their help. This time the judge agreed that I did have the right to walk the streets safely and convicted my attacker.

It's taken me many years to acknowledge and process the anger, the hurt, the fear and the sadness that culminated with this incident. Part of this process has involved writing. Writing in my journals, tentatively writing prose and poetry, tentatively writing myself. For the longest time I couldn't write, but I could finally speak, and I did so with a vengeance. As I came to terms with myself and my life it became not only easier, but necessary to write. As I learn to trust people, love them, and allow them to love me, I learn to allow myself to love my writing, and in turn love myself. And by loving myself, I have finally allowed myself to come out, to accept and celebrate who

I have always been, and who I have to offer to others. I, like many others before me, have survived, and learned to use the events of my life as learning experiences and as tools. Trite as this sounds, they either take you down with them or allow you to grow from them.

I'd like to say that she lived happily ever after, but that only happens in fairy tales. But, she is discovering who she is, and that in itself allows for joy and strength in her life. She tells me that she wouldn't recommend it for everybody, but it does add a certain amount of spice to her life, and she can always turn it into fiction.

Notes

1. After much consideration, I chose to write this story under a pseudonym to protect the privacy of the people involved. We have all undergone change and growth in our lives, and things today are not as they were in the past. I can choose only to subject my self, and must allow that same choice to others.