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Reader Response Essay
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Me Too Movement Haiku

Every woman has either been raped or knows a woman who has been raped, but no man knows a rapist. This line has become a common statement when people talk about sexual assault and abuse. It's unfortunate, but I believe it to be true. I know it to be true from my own personal experiences. This is the exact reason that we need to continue talking about sexual assault and abuse. We need to take down the walls and talk about rape with both men and women. The Me Too movement, which began in 2006 (BBC), has been instrumental in cracking the conversation about rape wide open. People began telling their survival stories about sexual assault without shame or fear, inspiring others to stand up. Our society began to realize that some of our heroes were really villains. Law enforcement was forced to look into allegations that came to light during the Me Too movement. This movement has been inspiring and courageous, but it is far from being over. The conversation must continue, and we must keep calling for change and for justice.

The book, *Unsealing Our Secrets: A Short Poem Anthology About Sexual Abuse* curated and edited by Alexis Rotella, provides accounts written by survivors. It is illuminating, heartbreaking, and necessary to raise awareness. It also shows how haiku can be used as an artistic outlet to tell a story, even when the story may be very difficult to put into words. It is important in reading all haiku, but especially these haiku, to take a moment of quiet, read each haiku a few times, and feel the author's words. Listen to each story, and see how art and courage merge to create these haiku. Before I begin, I would like to personally say that I am incredibly proud of every person who demonstrated great bravery by telling their story in this book, and to anyone who is a survivor reading this – I am proud of you for surviving.

"We dance round in a ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows."

Robert Frost, *The Secret Sits*

walking home alone
shops barred shut
his footsteps echo mine

Barbara Sabol, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 16

I can feel this haiku. I imagine a young woman walking home alone at night. Maybe she's walking home from work. She could be walking home from a friend's house; maybe a party. Regardless, she had to make the decision to walk home alone. She knew she shouldn't be walking alone at night. She knew she'd be in danger. The simple act of walking at night as a woman puts her in danger. Whatever her circumstances were, she was forced into a position where she had to walk alone. At night. I know she was forced into this decision because no woman would willingly walk alone at night - we all know how unsafe it is. The entire walk she's hoping, praying that she gets home safe. Praying that she gets home without being catcalled, without being followed, without being raped. Or worse yet, without being killed. I imagine she's almost home and feeling victorious because the walk has been uneventful thus far when she hears them. Footsteps. Her heartbeat quickens. Her palms begin to sweat. She tries not to panic, tries to explain it away in her mind. It's a Saturday of course people are walking home from various places. But why is this person walking behind her on her quiet street? Not many people walk down her street as it's relatively out of the way. She finally gathers the courage to look behind her. She doesn't know what she expected; she should have known when she turned around, she'd see a man following her. Leering at her saying nothing. She quickens her pace. So does he. It feels like they are being controlled by the same puppet master. Their strings pulled simultaneously forcing their paces to match. There's nowhere for her to run. The area is residential, and the

few shops on the street are closed. She just has to hope she's able to get in the door and lock it fast enough. She debates whether she should start running. Would that deter him? Would it excite him? One block between her and her house. He continues trailing, matching her pace.

Sheer green bodice
opaque tan lining
never worn again

Robin Palley, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 17

I imagine a woman getting ready for work. She works in a high-rise office building as a marketing consultant. Although she loves her job, it can feel like somewhat a boy's club at times. That doesn't matter though because she is a strong woman, and she proves every day that she can keep up with the boys. She pulls a new dress out of her closet. It's a beautiful dress with green lace over a tan lining. Taking the tags off, she slips the dress on and feels... amazing. Empowered. Gorgeous. Green is so her color. She finishes getting ready and heads to work in a better mood than most days. A new dress can just boost your mood like that. She walks into the office head held high feeling confident and optimistic about the day. Something strange happens though. When she walks in she feels the burning gaze of every man in the office on her. Suddenly she feels ashamed. She wants to be invisible. She tries to brush it off and settles in at her desk. The day goes downhill from there. A male colleague comes up behind her and rubs her shoulders at lunch. In the break room while she gets coffee, she's asked what work outs she does to get such a nice ass. Her boss compliments her telling her she looks... more feminine than usual. The women in the office glare at her all day. Her assistant asks her who she's trying to impress. All day she feels disgusting. She wonders why she would ever think it was a good idea to wear such a "sexy" dress to work. She doesn't realize it isn't her, it's *them*. On the drive home she cries. She feels like an idiot. When she gets home, she unzips the dress and throws it in the trash. She hates the dress. That dress was the problem in her mind.

Teddy bear with one eye the things it cannot tell

Anonymous, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 54

I picture a child, maybe six years old, but they've been abused by the father for most of their short life. They have a room full of toys. Most of the toys were gifts from their father. It was typical behavior in their household that their father would abuse them and then get them a gift. Maybe the gifts were his way of apologizing. Maybe they were a method to buy the child's silence. Years worth of toys and gifts, hardly ever touched. The child's favorite toy was one from their grandmother — a teddy bear with one eye. It had been hers as a child, and she had given it to the child when they were born. The teddy bear was the child's best friend. They told all of their secrets to the teddy bear. Even the secrets that were supposed to be kept between the child and their father. He always told the child it was their little secret and wasn't to be shared with anyone - ever. The teddy bear knew though. The teddy bear saw everything. Unfortunately, the teddy bear was the only one who knew outside of the father and the child. If only the teddy bear could tell someone, maybe the child's pain would end. It couldn't though.

anniversary gift
lily-of-the-valley
perfuming his fist

Helen Buckingham, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 57

I imagine a couple who's been married for a long time. Maybe 20 years. They look perfectly happy from the outside. The husband dotes on the wife — getting her gifts constantly. Her friends always talk about how jealous they are because all their husbands can't be bothered to get them anything for their birthdays let alone out of the blue. What they don't know, however, is that it's all a facade. The husband beats the wife.

Viciously. It started shortly after they got married. She thought maybe he would change, but he never did. It got to the point where she felt so trapped, so helpless that she just stayed. She thought nobody would believe her because he had convinced everyone they had the perfect marriage. Nobody knew that the constant doting and gifts were to make up for the ruthless beatings. It was a cycle she'd endured for 20 years. He'd lose his temper on her, leave, and come back with gifts. Maybe he truly believed the gifts made up for the beatings. Maybe he brought gifts to show his control over her. There's no way she could know. For their anniversary he brings home flowers. She's happy for a moment - there was no beating before this gift. That is until he decides her reaction wasn't appropriate and becomes enraged. He hits her. She almost laughs at the irony when she realizes she can smell those beautiful flowers on his hands each time he hits her.

my silent cries
for help
no one can hear

Tracy Davidson, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 72

This haiku reminds me of the sentiment shared by many people, especially women, that we need to be polite. I picture a house party. A woman and her friends decide to go because, honestly, they've had a hard week, and they deserve it. They get all dressed up in cute outfits. They do their make-up. Sure, it feels a little silly because it's not like they're looking for anything, but it doesn't matter. They look good for themselves, and that's reason enough to get dressed up. It feels good to make themselves up. They feel confident. They feel indestructible. They get to the house party, and the alcohol starts flowing. They're having the best time dancing with each other, laughing, singing. One of them yells to the others that she has to go to the bathroom, but nobody hears her. She figures it will be fine to just go by herself even though the general rule at a party is to not go anywhere alone. She's had a few drinks and is feeling more confident than usual, so she just slips away from the group. She makes her way upstairs and finds the bathroom. After somewhat fumbling around in the bathroom, she makes her way back downstairs feeling accomplished for going off on her own and staying safe. When she gets back to the party, however, she can't find her friends. They aren't where she left them. A man comes up to her and starts trying to talk to her. She tries to be polite and make small talk, but she is frantically looking for her friends. He puts his hands on her hips trying to force her to dance with him. She smiles at him nervously, still looking for her friends. Finally, she catches the gaze of a friend and tries to give her "help me!!" Eyes. The friend is unreceptive. Instead of helping her she smiles wider and gives her a thumbs up. She sends a help me text hoping a friend will come and save her from this creep, but nobody responds. Trying not to cause a scene, she stiffly dances with the man, a tear rolling down her cheek.

toffee in my mouth
I spit out the bitterness
of his forced kiss

Shrikanth Krishnamurthy, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 106

When I read this haiku, I picture a woman in the bar. She's out with a friend getting drinks after a stressful week at work. They've been having a good time chatting and laughing when the woman decides to go out for a smoke break. Her friend doesn't smoke, and has been chatting up some guy at the bar, so she decides to go out alone. Since it's a pretty dive-y bar, and not many people go there she figures it won't be a big deal. She's outside enjoying the cool night and her cigarette when a man approaches her. She gets a little bit nervous because, well, it's a man approaching her at night. He starts talking to her though, and she decides he's nice enough. They chat for a while as she finishes her cigarette. She says she's going to head back inside to meet up with her friend, but when she turns to open the door, he grabs her arm. She turns around quickly, her heart racing, and tells him to let go of her. Instead, his grip tightens and she pulls her closer to him. He tells her he just wants to have some fun, and he doesn't want any trouble. She tries to tell him to

fuck off and let go of her immediately, but he cuts her off by forcing a kiss. He tastes like whiskey and tobacco. She struggles to get away from him to no avail. Eventually she raises her knee to his groin. Hard. Finally, he lets go, and she runs inside. She runs past her friend, straight to the bathroom and vomits. Her friend asks her what happened, but she only says that she had one too many. They never go back to that bar again.

Nursing mother
a man on the bus whispers
lucky boy

David Oates, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 120

I am not a mother, so I have no idea what this feels like. I can only imagine. When I read this haiku, I think about the struggles that mothers go through with breast feeding. Not only is it uncomfortable and mentally and physically draining, it also unfortunately opens them up for abusive comments. I have read innumerable stories about the struggles that women go through at work while trying to pump. Many places don't actually offer a designated room for pumping or breast feeding, so women are forced to do it in the break room, the bathroom, at their desk, on the bus, etc. Although women should be able to breast feed or pump wherever they feel comfortable doing it, the lack of privacy is a problem because of the abusive comments commonly made by men and some women. Mothers are told that it's inappropriate or lewd. They are subject to comments about their breasts or about how lucky their baby is. It's disgusting and further stigmatizes breast feeding/pumping making it increasingly difficult for mothers to even exist in public.

Sunday School lesson
we learn about
Eve's curse

Terri L. French, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 79

Catholic shame. That is what this haiku brings to mind for me. I went to Catholic school for nine years. All throughout my education there we were taught that women are to blame for the fall of humanity. Everything was perfect when God created it in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve lived in blissful peace. Until one day the serpent tempted Eve. Since Eve was apparently so weak, she gave in. She ate the forbidden fruit and cursed all of humanity. Looking back this was an extremely thinly veiled reference to women expressing sexuality and being sexually liberated. Eve is seen as weak. For what? Partaking in pleasure? Give me a break. The goal was to shame us young girls into being meek and submissive. Eve's curse from God, according to the Bible was painful childbirth. So I guess the church wanted us to believe that since the first woman betrayed us, all women were cursed. Adam though? Adam was perfect. He didn't ever eat the forbidden fruit and stood by Eve, his deeply flawed and sinful wife. It was all absolute bullshit. The shame that these lessons taught young girls probably kept them from speaking up about sexual assault later in life. They probably thought for a long time that it was their fault, that they did something wrong to tempt a man. I know I did.

the stain
of a shame
that isn't mine

Rebecca Drouilhet, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 87

When I read this haiku I imagine the shame that sexual assault survivors feel after the fact. Many survivors never come forward because they either already feel ashamed or know they will be shamed for telling their story. Whether they think it was their fault somehow (which it NEVER is) or if they believe someone will make it sound like their fault, many are scared to tell their stories. They are afraid people will tell them they

shouldn't have worn something so revealing, they shouldn't have drunk so much, they shouldn't have been doing drugs, they shouldn't have flirted with their abuser, they shouldn't have been walking alone, they can't get raped because they're a man, they should have watched their drink more closely, they shouldn't have been a sex worker if they didn't want to have sex, etc. It is disgusting and egregious that people try to force so many survivors to wear the shame of their assault. We have men and women, law enforcement, judges, lawyers, systems that protect abusers and deflect that shame onto survivors. The shame is not theirs, and yet they feel that they have the stain of this shame. This is what I believe the me too movement aims to strike down. This movement strives to wash away that stain of shame and remind survivors that telling their stories is brave. It is empowering. Although there may never be justice because of the backwards systems protecting abusers, the act of casting away the shame put on survivors by society is itself an act of justice. It's telling abusers and those who protect them that survivors refuse to be silent. They will not be shamed into complacency and dismissiveness. I think that is beautiful and powerful in itself and an incredible step toward true justice.

waiting her turn
patiently holding up a hand
me too

Randy Brooks, *Unsealing Our Secrets*, 104

This haiku makes me think of the power of the me too movement. It reminds me of the power that we have when we speak up in large numbers. It seems like every time someone came forward to tell their assault story, they would be silenced or have it pushed under the rug for a very long time. When the me too movement started, however, there was a massive amount of people standing up to say that they too had survived assault. It makes me imagine those scenes in movies when one person stands up in a crowd, and then everyone else starts standing up too. All it takes is those first few brave people to stand up and say something, and then there's a wave of others courageously standing beside them. The line "patiently holding up a hand" is very beautiful in this haiku. It stresses the importance of listening to each and every survivor and giving them their moment to tell their story. It reminds me of the respect shown in the me too movement.

Literature Cited

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