

1

You were disgusting and that's why I followed you
Into the house
Which wasn't yet on fire
(Or not as far as I could tell)

Right at the very beginning when you caught my eye,
I had the uncanny sense that I was making eye contact
with my own reflection. I thought that I understood this
wordless invitation, and I thought that I remembered
saying yes. But then you moved and I didn't, and time
and touch slips out of sync, sliding in and pulling out at
the same time.

When I follow you, I do not know that something is going
to break. I am not aware that I am dancing, beautifully,
on a very thin line. A wine glass slipping silently through
drunken fingers, a slow-motion blur then a high-pitched
shatter, and the room pulls back into focus.

I had grabbed hold of something intimate, but it had
gone before I had a chance to name it. So, it was
recognition that made me go after you. I was looking
for myself.¹ And with that in mind, there will always be
the question of blame.

2

When I arrived at the house the door was slightly open,
and so I slipped in quietly. There were things I wanted
to do and things that I didn't. But if there were rules,
they didn't apply to us. Nothing clear cut. Nothing hard
and fast. Nobody else's standards to abide by.

You can't believe everything you hear, you say, before
I have a chance to speak. I consider that maybe you
are right, that is for each of us to decide whose version
of the truth we hold on to. In that moment it is you that
I want to believe, and so I move further into the warmth
and lean in close, letting you shut the door behind me.²

*So, if you could just sit down there on the couch and
look straight into the camera, just here.*

There, that's it, perfect.

*Now, can you tell the person watching, is this your first
time doing this?*

I look straight forward and catch my reflection in the
lens. Flames are dancing all around me.

3

The next time I visit the house I let myself in. Already
it feels familiar, something here is mine.

I find him upstairs, sat on the end of the bed, hands
in his lap, head down. It's not true, he whispers, barely
audible. What they're saying, it isn't true, you have to
listen to me. I can tell you what happened.

I think for a moment about how I want this to go. I think
about what I have seen and what I have felt, and
I formulate a sort of protective logic in which I am the
one holding the leash. This new narrative makes perfect
sense to me, and the more I say it the more I believe it.
The edges of my body are beginning to blur.³

4

A video plays on a loop in my head. I watch myself,
over and over, each time slightly different from the one
before. It speeds up or slows down, the tone of my
voice changes, or the expression on my face. I thought
that I remembered us talking but now I watch it back the
conversation is different. I thought that I remembered
sitting down, laughing, defiant and in control. But in this
version I am shy, apprehensive, taking my cues from
somebody behind the lens.⁴

*Look up here, that's it, show us how much of a good
time you're having.*

The longer I watch the harder it is to tell which one is
right. Each new version distorts the one before.

You can't believe everything you hear, you say, again.
And this time I say nothing.⁵

5

A year later some people get in touch.

We sit on cushions on the floor, taking turns to talk.
Somewhere outside an alarm goes off but nobody
seems to notice. The sound builds and builds and
I'm sure I'm supposed to be reacting in some way,

1 In truth I was waiting for something to happen. Unsupervised, I had
my choice of dark rooms. I knew which rooms were bad and I entered
them anyway. It was a sort of power.^a

2 In the Laurel School Study, Lyn Mikel Brown, Carol Gilligan, and Annie
Rogers found that, prior to adolescence, many young girls demonstrate
a strong sense of self, an ability to know and voice their feelings and
thoughts and to give authority to their experience. The sometimes
unsettling directness and clarity of young girls' descriptions of the
human world reveals a detailed knowledge and careful rendering of
psychological realities.

At adolescence, however, a shift takes place for many girls as they
experience a relational impasse and a developmental crisis... In the
face of this relational crisis, a preadolescent resilience can give way to
an increasing uncertainty, a hesitancy in speaking, a tendency toward
self-doubt that questions the validity of their feelings and dismisses
the value of their experiences.^b

3 Confidence could thus be understood as an orientation toward the
future even if it is experienced in the present: to be confident about
something is to be confident of something: that what you wish to
bring about can be brought about... To lose confidence can then

be to lose strength not because you become physically weaker but
because your estimation of what you can do has weakened; you are
not sure if you can carry that thing; it is too heavy, your arm hurts,
you waver; it falls, you fall.^c

4 Women are taught – not least by coercive men themselves – to care
inordinately about men's feelings; they are socialized to feel responsible
for men's well-being, hence also their anger and their violence. They
are also taught that if they 'give signals', they must see things through;
that if they say no after apparently showing interest, the repercussions
are ones for which they only have themselves to blame. A hurt male ego
is one more likely to lash out, and since much social communication
is indirect, especially when fear enters the picture, women say no
cautiously, gingerly, covertly, so as to allow a man to save face, and
to avoid antagonising him.^d

5 Without language, indecision sounds a lot like ambivalence, looks
a lot like passivity, feels a lot like compliance. But the state of being
perpetually undecided is, it turns out, completely disarming. And that
indecision, constant indecision, which when you look at it like this,
if I don't know, I just don't know, or if I actually don't give a shit either
way – then does that qualify as consent?

so I stand up and close the windows, drawing the curtains shut for good measure. The screeching quiets and then I can listen again. Somebody says the word intervention.

When everybody else has spoken, the circle turns to me.⁶

I let out a deep breath and the rest of the room exhales with me. There are many different ways this could go. Nobody is going to rush this.

We draw concentric circles around him, discussing what accountability might look like, on both a personal and a public level. We talk about the power structures that are upholding and being upheld. We talk about what we all stand to lose.⁷

We talk in vaguely specific ways about things that have happened, or that might have happened. About how one thing can also be another thing, and how proximity can blur, so much so that at some point you can't even tell the difference anymore. The necessity for anonymity makes everything so slippery. There are many people who are still too close.

We talk about harm reduction, different kinds of justice, restorative vs punitive. We talk about personal safety, about a duty of care for everybody involved. We even talk about extending this hand to the perpetrator.

For those of us that have attempted to do this before, there is a sense of fatigue. When I try and imagine how this will play out, I can hear his voice in my head. Thank you for making me accountable he will say, with practiced sincerity, there is real work to be done here. A slow nodding of the head and a thoughtful expression, a pat on the back for taking the time to listen.

Everybody is concerned about how a person can flex the language of accountability with such conviction. About how they can talk so fluently with such an apparent level of self-reflection. We talk about optics and the performance of victimhood.

We talk about hiding in plain sight.

6

It is a Sunday evening in November when the wave crashes. There are three of us sprawled out on the sofa after a heavy night, and we are mid-way through ordering a takeaway when the notifications start flooding in.

It starts with an anonymous account sharing memes, and then one faceless voice becomes a cacophony. At first it is funny and then it is not; humour slides quickly into something much darker, allegations flashing up white text against black. Concrete, resolute, inescapable. The food arrives and sits on the table, a white plastic bag going cold, as we read frantically, taking screenshots, and sharing. And then the account is deleted.

There is silence for a moment before the voices start. Everybody, it seems, has an opinion. Everybody, it seems, is watching with intrigue. Whatever ambiguity there was is gone.

Don't look at me love, look at the camera. Pretend there's nobody else here. Just tell us what we want to hear.

Something stands still, while at the same time years begin to unravel. And I am back at the front door, deciding whether or not to go in.⁸ I know that I must return to some of these rooms, but when I go inside nothing looks like how I remember.

Somewhere in my attempt to grab onto something solid I start to lose sense of myself. I am not sure what I am looking for, but I find myself locking each of the doors behind me. The question of what it is that I am trying to find hangs over me, unanswerable. My sense of linear time is collapsing. The axis tilts, and blank spaces in my memory begin forming into images, but they are either too hazy or too complicated to look at directly.

Whatever is happening out there, I cannot contain it. Flames are licking at the door.

In one room there is a tv and the video from my head is playing. The same loop, the same sequence, but slightly different each time. I pick up the remote and start to flick between them, fast forward, rewind, over and over. I don't recognise these versions of me. I don't know exactly how it happened. I'm not sure that anything happened, exactly. But I keep watching, looking for culpability, looking for something to hold onto, so that I can come down on one side or the other.⁹

I think I can hear whispering coming from the other side of the wall.

6 Sometimes your tongue is removed, sometimes you still it of your own accord... Sometimes you have a name, sometimes you are named for what – not who – you are. The story always looks a little different, depending on who is telling it.^e

7 This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. This didn't happen. It didn't happen. It didn't happen.

8 The rhetorical thrust of much consent culture – the well-meaning advice, the injunctions and admonitions – is suspicious of tentativeness; it privileges a robust self-knowledge about desire, and a capacity for vocal expression of it... What's more, consent rhetoric doesn't allow for ambivalence, and it risks making impermissible – indeed dangerous – not simply a difficulty in expressing desire, but the experience of not knowing what we want in the first place.^f

9 I consider my options and I consider the outcomes. I consider that it is for me to decide which version of the truth I hold onto.

a Chelsea Hodson, *Pity The Animal* (Future Tense Books, 2014). p.24

b Jill McLean Taylor, Carol Gilligan, and Amy M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995). p.23–24

c Sara Ahmed, "Losing Confidence," wordpress, *Feministkilljoys* (blog), March 1, 2016, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/03/01/losing-confidence/>

d Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* (London; New York: Verso, 2021). p.10

e Carmen Maria Machado, *In The Dream House* (Serpent's Tail, 2020). p.39

f Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* (London; New York: Verso, 2021). p.17–18