

ISSN: 2514-0612

Journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>

---

Voice

Author(s): Alanna McArdle

Email: [akj.mcardle@gmail.com](mailto:akj.mcardle@gmail.com)

Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 2020), pp. 110–122.

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/172>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v4i1.172>

---

© Alanna McArdle

License (open-access): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. No warranty, express or implied, is given. Nor is any representation made that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for any actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

*Brief Encounters* is an open access journal that supports the dissemination of knowledge to a global readership. All articles are free to read and accessible to all with no registration required. For more information please visit our journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>.

In association with

## Voice

---

Alanna McArdle

*Voice* is an extract from a longer text entitled *Dark Matter* that is made up of five parts, each containing verse, lyric essays, and prose-poetry. *Dark Matter* uses the lyric ‘I’ and considers the radical possibilities of its application in the interrogation of trauma and selfhood, and the conflict between self-definition and medical/institutional definition. The text is both narrative and lyrical, tracking part of my experience as a person with Bipolar Disorder inside and outside of medical institutions. Taking inspiration from Denise Riley’s *The Words of Selves*, *Voice* focusses on the syntactical and phonological features of self-expression. Riley posits: ‘Announcing what I am may... labour under its burden of communicative intent, for my self-definition can be a determined appeal for recognition’.<sup>1</sup> What, then, does this ‘recognition’ mean for a speaker confronting their own trauma and mental illness? What does that burden of intent do to the writing which aims to convey it? This question of what the self is in relation to others is a key part of the work. This philosophical query takes on an extra burden of its own, and is often amplified when self-definition is interrupted by institutional definition, for instance, diagnoses. ‘What am I to others?’ becomes ‘Am I a person? Or a patient?’

Judith Butler, in her essay on Descartes’s *Meditations*, puts forward another problem in response to these questions, that ‘the body is given through language, but it is not, for that reason, reducible to language’.<sup>2</sup> In *Voice*, I ask whether the writing down of my body, and therefore my illness, somehow transcends the experience of being constantly defined and re-defined within institutions and their inevitable hierarchies, partly structured by the inaccessible language of diagnosis. In writing, do I refuse this institutional construction of my body? Whose language holds more power?

*Voice* interrogates the generic and formal distinctions of poetry and life-writing to pose questions of how writer and speaker interconnect, and to explode arbitrary literary conventions which themselves limit and oppress expression by way of their rigidity of definition. Anne Carson’s work, in particular the poem-cum-play *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, was influential to the work, as it probes language’s constructive and deconstructive impacts. In one of its ‘History Lesson’ interludes, an unnamed speaker muses, ‘Sometimes I think language should cover its own eyes when it speaks’.<sup>3</sup> Emily Berry’s speaker in the poem ‘Ghost Dance’ wonders ‘I cannot tell what I should choose / Whether to speak straight into the camera or keep my back to it / Whether to distort my voice when I say the difficult thing’.<sup>4</sup> In *Voice*, I aim to show how this covering of the eyes of language, this distortion in saying ‘the difficult thing’ may be transmuted through lyric, to use the ‘I’ as more than simply a perspective.

In this way, *Voice* explores the possibility of recalibrating or reclaiming the oppressive syntax of medicine. It asks how the self is transformed through not just the experience of illness, but also illness’s subsequent side effect of institutionalisation, and the intersections of other ‘othered’ and marginalised identities and experiences within this discursive category.

*Voice* draws on and re-appropriates the oft-misogynistic and derisively applied label of ‘confessional writing’. First coined as a name for a school of poets of all genders, the descriptor ‘confessional’ has

---

<sup>1</sup> Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, ‘How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine?’, *Qui Parle*, 11.1 (1997), 1–20 (p. 5).

<sup>3</sup> Anne Carson, *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* (London: Oberon Books, 2019), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Berry, *Stranger, Baby* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), p. 51.

transmuted into a catch-all term for work assumed to be about the author, especially when that author is a woman. Leslie Jamison writes that:

[confessional writing's] heritage is often traced to women writers, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and its critiques are insidiously – and subcutaneously – gendered. So many of the attacks against the confessional mode come back to the language of the body: An author is spilling her guts or bleeding on the page. Her writing whores itself out, exposing private trauma for public fame.<sup>5</sup>

Plath's poetry, often reconsidered in the wake of her suicide as being directly linked to her own voice as a poet, rather than filtered through a *speaker's* 'I', became somewhat emblematic of the confessional mode. This default assumption of an 'I' being the poet herself acts in a way that can impose limits on the imaginative and intellectual capabilities of the poet. Poems, especially those concerned with the so-called domestic, then become frivolous diaries, a list of things deemed unworthy to be made into art. Veronica Forrest-Thomson, in *Poetic Artifice*, unpacks Ted Hughes' criticism of Plath's poem *Last Words*, which he says 'is a poem which would have been safer said by a persona in some kind of play'.<sup>6</sup> Thomson responds that this may be so 'if we are concerned with Sylvia Plath the individual... [Hughes's comment] demonstrates the notion that the woman who suffers cannot relieve her suffering by becoming the mind which creates'.<sup>7</sup> To redefine Plath's poem as a theatrical monologue attributes a quality of melodrama to her work, rendering her use of the confessional mode a mere emotional outpouring. Furthermore, to re-contextualise what Plath made as verse into another genre entirely removes all agency of the poet, a violent reduction of authorial intent.

In *Notes Made While Falling*, Jenn Ashworth asserts that 'any time a woman utters a sentence about her own experience, she becomes a kind of terrorist and there's an army out there waiting to strike her down'.<sup>8</sup> The confessional, then, should be reclaimed and added to an arsenal, should be used to speak unapologetically of lives and experiences deemed at once too difficult to hear, yet too unimportant to take seriously. What women writers often face, Ashworth goes on to write, is 'the sense that in uttering the truth of painful experience [a woman] is letting the side down and embracing the straightjacket and the hysteric's sickbed a little too easily'.<sup>9</sup> *Voice* aims to reclaim these utterances, to confront the historical nexus of discriminations that has led to what the psychiatrist and author Phyllis Chesler calls 'the female career as psychiatric patient'.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Leslie Jamison, 'In the Age of Memoir, What's the Legacy of the Confessional Mode?', *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, 4 Oct 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/books/review/in-the-age-of-memoir-whats-the-legacy-of-the-confessional-mode.html> [accessed on 1 February 2020].

<sup>6</sup> Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Jenn Ashworth, *Notes Made While Falling*, (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2019), p. 104.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*, (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Review Press, 2018), p. 173.

## **Voice**

*Do you try to deplete something  
in yourself*  
the therapist asks

But really she doesn't she  
never asks anything so relevant  
more of the same like  
what did you dream last night

I dreamt of being sad  
guess that means I'm sad

Maybe  
she says  
you're just an existentialist  
tells me to read Camus

A lamp shines dumbly  
in the corner

I stifle a laugh

Maybe I'm just a lamp  
or the dumb moth on the lamp

pretty way to say you want to die

*It's been years!*

*Where are the moths now? Fizzed to black on their scabrous bell jars*

*It's been years!*

*How much chalk do you swallow on any given day?*

*Years, darling, years, still not better?*

*What do the voices in your head sound like?*

*Just kidding! I can hear myself so clearly right now*

I sit on a squeaky pink chair in a room pasted with children's drawings

Face grey as the walls  
turned away from the nurses

I say to them

*Sister,  
sister,  
I'm scared to tell you  
how I feel*

I hear that voice ringing from the first  
nurse in the first hospital

*If you keep crying like that you're going to be sectioned*

I hear how I stopped crying  
hear the lie in my discharge assessment

*I won't try to do it again*

Hear my brother almost crying  
as I lie on the floor, all  
coiled up like a dead centipede

Hear  
vacantly  
*I love you I love you I don't want  
you to do anything to yourself again*

Sister says  
*Our job is to make sure you don't get sectioned  
That's why it's called the Home Treatment team*

It's unclear whether this is to do with my treatment plan  
or the crisis in the NHS: no beds left, children  
shipped off two hundred miles from home or  
put in jail cells

Can you hear it?  
The dull clank of  
austerity

I can't relax  
I don't believe them

I am sent to a different room. Two women in lanyards.

Psychiatrist, FY1 Doctor, mental patient      (mental I said! Did you hear me?  
*mental I said*)

salmon pink  
walls peeling paint,  
big box of Man-Size Kleenex for my  
girl-sized tears              (good ,              good girl)

I rub my hands together and look at the floor

Ugly carpet

The doctor begins to write in her notepad

Shoesscuffednoeyecontacthairgreasysmallvoicevisiblescars

*Let's start with your history*

\*

Imagine your body as a cloud  
whole entity made from vapour  
and vapour made of shards  
always collapsing and rebuilding itself  
shredding your fabric  
a ladder in the nylon of your want  
what do you want?  
To not be a collage  
*I am not a whole person, I cry, I*  
*am just bits and pieces*  
salvaging, like  
trying to hold the whites of the sky  
feeling them grate through your fingers  
sharp tears  
*My history*  
what that means is  
my illness  
no luxury of life  
as others know it.  
*History*  
is just a mimicry of a voice



like how I am merely a foil

for all the things that have happened to me.

Write it down.

\*

Before I learnt how trauma works I thought my memory was faulty  
I couldn't retain a thing  
If you asked me about my childhood  
I would say it was *grey*

Things float in,  
vague as the colour  
of pickle brine

Some community choir  
swimming lessons  
kissing girls in the school toilets,

wanting to die,

( O, Wanting To Die, isn't that the Sexton poem? and that old first  
love of mine, that *almost unnameable*

*lust* )

not understanding that I wasn't supposed to want  
what I wanted

The weather in my memories is always bad, but this part might be true  
I grew up in England

*It's just that your memory is depressed*  
says some idiot in  
A&E on  
Christmas Eve

Someone reads something I've written  
says  
*Children aren't really this unhappy*

What can I say, maybe I'm a liar  
for many, mentally ill is a synonym for *untrustworthy*

Anyway,

I can't wait to have a wedding  
so that I finally know  
which was the happiest day of my  
life.

*Your history*

Is that what I'm trying to do here?

The more I say *I*, will I become me?

The more they say *you* it wanes and wanes and wanes and wanes and

Here is the failure of language

Who is describing me this time  
and what do they mean

And what do I mean  
when I write it down like this  
spill into existence  
or out of it

Killing myself  
physically, after all,  
did not work

\*

Every night I  
open my hands  
to the dark weight of hope  
and ask  
politely  
to hold it

The therapist tells me  
*I don't have the capacity to contain you  
and it seems as though you  
need to be held  
quite a bit*

I'm like,  
I'm fine I'm just  
tired

I'm like,  
having those dreams again  
about the feeding tubes  
and the way they rasped  
out my throat when I  
woke

Dreams about how  
you don't actually dream  
when you're in a coma

Did you know that?

I'm not quite  
feeling like myself today

I'm not quite feeling  
today

## Bibliography

- Ashworth, Jenn, *Notes Made While Falling* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2019)
- Berry, Emily, *Stranger, Baby* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017)
- Butler, Judith, 'How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine?', *Qui Parle*, 11.1 (1997), 1–20
- Carson, Anne, *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* (London: Oberon Books, 2019)
- Chesler, Phyllis, *Women and Madness* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Review Press, 2018)
- Collins, Sophie, *small white monkeys* (London: Book Works, 2018)
- Collins, Sophie, *Who Is Mary Sue?* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018)
- Forrest-Thomson, Veronica, *Poetic Artifice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978)
- Hill, Selima, *The Accumulation of Small Acts of Kindness* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989)
- Hill, Selima, *Bunny* (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2001)
- Laing, R.D., *The Divided Self* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010)
- Riley, Denise, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000)
- Sexton, Anne, *The Complete Poems* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1999)
- Zambreno, Kate, *Book of Mutter* (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 2017)

Copyright © Alanna McArdle 2020