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There Was a Woman Who Swallowed a Story

Donna F. Henson¹ 

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Abstract

This performative piece indulges in the critical feminist pseudo-fantasies of a sleep-deprived woman in her 40's—a woman of a certain . . . rage. This ruminative offering presents a lyrical rendering provoked by reflection on the one-note-wonders of the patriarchy, and inspired in part by Caroline Criado-Perez's book *"Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men"* and the poignant provocation offered by Bryant Keith Alexander. Playing in the liminal and critical spaces of poetic inquiry, the resulting autoethnographic essay explores the viral legacies of law and legislation, and the cures and consequences of aging as a woman in a world wrought by midnight fairy tales of crones and witches.

Keywords

autoethnography, performative writing, poetic inquiry, writing as a method of inquiry

It's 3am. I must be. . . old. Unlovable. Invisible. Unloved. A woman in her 40's.

A woman of a certain. . . rage.

Burning on the edge, in a slow-motion mutiny of rhyme and reason. Betrayed by my body. Held hostage by my mind. Swallowed by a story.

Counting all my flaws and failings.

As I lay there and listen to the World forget to breathe.

The unpaid bills and debts of gratitude and that thing I think I said last Wednesday. Last year. In another life.

The witching hour and all the things too big, too small for daylight.

Let me count the ways, do the math, do the madness. Magnify the fine-line fractures, the cracks are showing, what's the worst that could happen?

Here. Here's the worst that could happen . . .

These midnight swings between sign and possibility. Disease, dis-ease, death and disaster.

Thinking. . .sometimes. . . my legacy ends here.

My Love! Wake Up!

The sky is falling. The earth is sinking. The world is ending!

Reader. He could breathe louder.

I think on the distance between us. And dwell on this dense and hard-fought love. Destroyed by every breath.

Your nightly oblivion.

Your ritualistic unconscious state of being.

Your easy sleep that taunts me in this fraught and futile shadow-time—when women think of all the ways they might kill a man.

As they count the minutes to a new day dawning.

The words of Fleur Adcock float in on the ether, speaking to the shallowest of selves.

“Well: that was a metropolitan vanity,

wanting to look young forever, to pass” (Adcock, 2000).

Come daylight, you ask a roomful of 20-year-olds the question: mind or body? There is no right answer, you say.

But they are always—always— all so very wrong.

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You think, you fear, you are beginning to agree with them.

If only, perhaps for once, to get out of your head. It is hard living here, in these flights of fancy—these midnight fairy tales of crones and witches and fantasies of a dim dark future.

Reports suggest “she was violently assaulted by a metaphor” (Quin, 2023). By an opinion. By a stereotype. By a fact.

You watch. You watch—your promising young women. These strong female leads. With a head full of revenge and a heart full of possibility.

You see the TikTok School of Hard Knocks is coming for them. Coming hard, coming fast.

(Wait! It’s already here).

This world of small hands and sexist pianos (Criado-Perez, 2019). The white stiletto feminism of myth and merit. All power to you. Just leave the ladder out by the door.

I’m afraid for them all.

God, I miss the Nineties. (As if *that* were an enlightened time).

This living is exhausting. This uphill-downhill rat-ridden race of aspiration and inspiration. These small stories, of devils in the detail, the home truths, hard truths of policy and practice. Put out, lean in, harder, faster, more—oh my! Pick a path, pick a promise. Happy ever afters, ever maybes. Swallow this story. Swallow that. Just be sure to distract. . .

Distract yourself in the pretty petty prescriptions for you and all your failings. Fix yourself! Fix your life. Self-love, self-care, self-ish. Be different. Be more. Be less. Be better.

Distract! Distract yourself—all the women of the world. Get better. Take this. Nip this. Tuck that. Don’t worry your pretty little head about it. . . The world will still be here tomorrow.

I’m getting too old for this.

There must be a pill for that.

It is all I see now. The one note wonders of the patriarchy. The viral legacies of law and legislation. The music of invisible hands. The radical and ridiculous: pink tax and pay-gaps. *But Darling, come on now. It’s not the baggage. It’s how you carry it.*

The curse of cures and caring. The thinner skin and chemical consequences of the drugs-don’t-work-but-we-don’t-want-to-know.

Bothered and bewildered, she swallows it down.

This “jagged little pill” (Morissette, 1995) of privilege.

It would take someone with nothing to lose.

(There’s always something to lose).

Sometimes I think I could burn this life down.

Find some sweet satisfaction in lighting the match, my hot breath kindling a flame, nurturing it—like the mother I’ve never been. Watch me raise dragons and manifest magic! A conflagration of rumination, and ruination, myth, and mayhem. These fantasies of feminine power, my snake oil for the soul.

It’s the look-don’t-touch of life and time and possibility.

Like a Phoenix, she rose from the ashes: feared and revered in the cronehood coming.

She swallowed a story and bit her tongue and played with matches. And smiled. Sugar and spice and all things nice. The sweet fragility of grandmothers (I’ll never be a grandmother). No bleeding. No talking. No telling. Shush now.

Women should be seen but not heard. I think what she meant to say was. . .

I fear you take me for granted.

Like these women who love too much, who bear this burden of life and disappointment. In a world where the wolves won’t run themselves, tomorrow might never come.

No one knows where they are going until they get there.

No one knows who they are until they have been.

I’m not sleeping. I think there’s a pill for that.

God. The things we choose to care about.

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Red paint or tomato juice is [Tweet]. <https://twitter.com/philquin/status/1640198713196052481>

Author Biography

Donna F. Henson is an Associate Professor of Communication at Bond University. Her research interests currently center on the intersections between and among communication, narrative, and meaning-making. She has published autoethnographic work on narrative identity, rumination, and meaning-making post-trauma.