

Both Sides Now  
Rachel Williams

I need to be here.  
I look at her face while the nurse looks at her vagina.  
I glimpse the inside of her thigh dotted with green and brown bruises  
Not like camouflage  
Tender --old blood just beneath the surface  
She says to the SANE nurse, "Can you tell me if I was raped"  
She thinks it was one of her roommates. She isn't sure which one. When she woke  
up her underwear was on the floor and her door was open.

My skull feels like porcelain  
Thin grooved walls  
Concentric finger prints  
Translucent  
Wobbly on the thin base of my spine  
Pulsing  
Overflowing with the congealed renderings of other people's trauma  
My teeth hurt.

How can I work on both sides.  
(As if there are only two)  
How can I like David, Caleb, Adam, Felix, Josh, Matthew, and Phil.  
Are all of their names are biblical?  
Their homemade tattoos  
A dagger on his wrist and thumb.  
Misspelled words, red bull, and doughnuts.  
They tease each other, they listen.  
They hold each other accountable.  
Do I use their labels to minimize their crimes?  
*Low -level sex offenders, cognitive disabilities*  
Josh is going to marry her but when it happened she was only 13.  
He loves their son.  
My own daughter is 12.

I see them every week. It is not the gig I planned.  
At least I can be sure that they haven't hurt anyone again.  
that they haven't been harmed.  
Phil was beaten for fun by two guys in his boarding house on the southeast side.  
They were drunk.  
He got arrested for carrying the taser his dad bought him for protection.  
He is autistic. He fills his time by walking and riding the bus around town.  
He is so genuine and he seems so kind.

Week four

Two attempt suicide.

Both end up in the intensive care unit.

David sent a picture of his penis to his girlfriend. She showed two other guys. They teased him. He got really scared that he would get caught and go back to prison.

He took an overdose of his father's muscle relaxants. He called his social worker to say goodbye.

His social worker called the ambulance.

Matt mixed sleeping pills with alcohol because the woman he met in church refused to see him again after she learned he was a sex offender.

\*Three weeks later they have sex in the back of his truck. He wants to marry her.

Week six

David is angry. He says, "If that little bitch hadn't lied about her age..."

He looks terrible this morning. His voice is still raspy from the breathing tube they forced down his throat at the hospital.

He has relapsed. His old meth dealer lives next door.

Adam smacks the table and says, "Hey man don't talk about your victims. DON'T.

" Chivalry has silenced us.

2:37AM on a Tuesday

I put both my children to bed before 10. I have been in bed for almost three hours.

After four years I have finally learned to sleep in spite of the phone.

The sound is in my dreams before I hear it.

One deep breath before I answer the call

I switch on the light and fumble around for my call book, a pen, and notepad in the space next to me on the bed.

The phone rings again.

I can feel the pulsing potential in my chest.

"Hello, this is the Rape Crisis line, how can I help you?"

"Is this line private?" The voice is a male.

I am polite and affirmative but furiously scribble down the number and start flipping through my call book. Is he an abusive caller? Has he called before? I can't help but be suspicious.

As he begins to describe his situation and ask questions that itchy feeling starts at the back of my neck. He isn't timid. He is too polite. He tells me that he just needs to describe what happened. "Do you have time for this? Are you alone?"

I know in my heart of hearts that he will be beating off in less than four minutes.

He will tell me in excruciating detail how he was tied up by his girlfriend and forced to ejaculate over and over, the victim of unwanted bondage. "Does she

sound normal to you?", "Do you have a boyfriend", "Do you like to tie men up?"

Or how his neighbors always watch him while he showers and it makes him feel like masturbating. "Do you ever masturbate in the shower?"

Or how a group of men at this gym held him down naked in the locker room just to see exactly how big his cock actually is, "How big are most cocks? Have you seen lots of cocks?"

I can still hear his breath in my ear after I hang up.  
FUCKER!!! I will spit through clenched teeth as I try to fall back asleep my head on my pillow.

Week 7

I don't like the new guy. I can smell his clothes. The P.O.s aren't sure he will actually fit into our S.O. group. He doesn't like me either. He keeps trying to pick a fight. I tell him that I don't care that he was forced to be here. His P.O. told me his victim was his 12 year-old cousin. He says, "She is a liar. I am the real victim." All of the guys are watching him. They don't like the way he talks to me. They can tell he makes me uncomfortable. They don't intervene. He is scary and angry. I don't care. I am angry. Two weeks later he fails to show up. He was arrested. Good riddance.

I don't want to do this.

Female sex offenders

*They* are not like me.

*They* are not like the other women at the prison.

Fourteen years I have worked here and I never thought about female sex offenders. Really thought about them.

*They* are different from the women I know (and care about despite their victims, missing teeth, borderline personality disorders and so on and so forth).

*These* women hurt babies; they are rapists, child molesters, perverts, pariahs.

The woman buffing the floor in the old visiting room won't look at *them*. We lock eyes and she makes a face.

All of *them* are here waiting to find out my interview schedule. Now *they* all know who is who.

"Damn it" I think, why did the control center announce this in the yard, "everyone will know. That isn't safe."

*They* twisted love and sex onto and in the bodies of their own babies, or watched, or didn't and did laundry instead.

*They* "made love" to boys half their age on gravel roads in the back of cars. Boys sprouting mustaches made from downy first hairs grown to tickle the lips of other teen-agers not their teacher.

*They were raped by their fathers, brothers, mother's boyfriends.  
They danced naked at family parties. Their bodies used over, and over, and over.  
They disassociated to survive.  
They did drugs to survive.  
They blacked out to survive.*

It is our fourth week together. Their life maps cover the table like placemats smeared with leftovers, bits and pieces of hellish childhoods. Jagged lines, years of empty spaces that they can't remember. Black holes, cold floors against their cheeks,

"Just the night light, that is all I can remember."

"It started when I was ten."

"It started when I was three."

"I can't remember a time that I wasn't afraid."

It is Belinda's day to tell her story.

"I knew I would have to do it. He threatened to leave me. I got him drunk. I had been drinking since he left for school that morning. He was nine. We watched a porn movie together and then I forced him to have oral sex with me. I called my husband afterward to tell him that I had finally done it. He was out of town. He didn't believe me."

She described everything but the sex act in great detail. She never made eye contact.

"I thought it wouldn't happen again. I told my son it was wrong. I made him promise not to tell."

Her insecurity, her fear of rejection, her shame

"I promised to honor and obey my husband."

Honor and obey

"He was never satisfied."

Like God in the Old Testament he tests her loyalty over and over again.

Her only son

It is two years before he becomes interested in a different kind of sex. Before her descriptions of sex acts with her son don't do it for him anymore. It will be three more years before her son tells someone at school. He describes everything but the sex acts in great detail. He was 14.

It will be 14 years before she gets treatment. She has heard nothing from her son in two years. He is now 28.

"Now that we are in prison I want to divorce him; I realize that our marriage stands in the way of me having a relationship with my son. My pastor has asked me not to break my vows. I am afraid to send him the letter I wrote. It will make him mad and hurt his feelings."

My own son is 9. I am afraid to rub his back as he falls asleep tonight.

It is May; I am nervous for the women in my group.

Will they pass the polygraph?

Eight months is not enough time to unpack their box of secrets and bring all of their shame into the light. The questions they have to answer are so personal.

\*Do you masturbate?

\*What do you think about when you masturbate?

\*Do you think about children?

\*Do you think sex with children is wrong?

\*Do you use porn?

\*What kind of pornography?

\*When you have sex what do you think about?

Monday Morning

Nina is leaving.

She sits across from me rocking gently in her grey sweat suit.

She is so happy. She is so giddy.

I am lucky that I was here today to do exit interviews. If I had come tomorrow I would have missed her.

After 9 years she is going to leave the prison.

His name is permanently tattooed on her neck.

"Where will you go?"

"My girlfriend wants me to live with her."

"Is she still on paper?"

"Yes and she has two kids. I'm scared. I am going to live at a hotel for a while.

They said they would give me a bus ticket to Forth Dodge and five dollars. I have \$250.00 in a savings account. My dad said he would help me."

I feel panic. She has been locked up for so long. She has never had a cell phone.

She has never had a job. She has a grey sweat suit, a pair of white tennis shoes, and a permanent tattoo of his name on her neck.

"What will you do?"

(No wait that is too much)

"It's ok, breathe, just breathe"

(I say this more for me than her)

"I'm on the registry for life. They gave me 90 days worth of my meds. I have to figure it out. I want to see my daughter but she is in South Dakota. I haven't seen her since she was two. I think I can work in the meat plant, I don't know where I can live yet. I think my P.O. will help me."

The uncertainty is overwhelming.

I imagine her sitting on the bus looking like a prisoner in her grey sweat suit, state issued tennis shoes with his name permanently tattooed on her neck.

"Ok, Ok on the *first* day, what will you do?"

I am here.

She is here.

We are here together.