

Ana Arredondo

## Wild Silent Drums

I. Violence<sup>1</sup>

*“There is no life to be found in violence. Every act of violence brings us closer to death.”—bell hooks*

Sex will kill us. Sex will hurt us. Sex is what “bad girls” do, they say. Our insides will fall out. Boys won’t want us anymore. We will be broken, unfixable, discarded, diseased, and dirty. Pregnancy. STDs. AIDS. They line the folds of our brains. We fear sex. We fear our flesh. Our bodies are entries for violence, they say. Breathlessness will kill us. We must stay so still that we vanish. We must hide from the threat, dissolve beneath thick white veils. Suffocate. They call protection airlessness. If sex is buried, it will melt into nothing, and we will all be saved.

*Saving ourselves. Pressure. Implosion. Waiting when we don’t want to wait. Wanting, and hiding want. Walking down the street in jean shorts or skirts. And then. Eyes like knives. Sidewalks. Thighs. Eyes like open graves. Gaze. Razor verbs: Desire. Saunter. Crave. Policing our curves. Staking claim. Neck bruises. Love taps. Being theirs. Marked. Blood shame. Fat Shame. Crying shame. Hysterical. Calm down. Whore. Puta. Slut. Loose. Easy. Tease.*

*Sliced throat.*

*No space to breathe.*

*We are at St. Andrews or St. Victors. There is a quiet hum of voices around us, a hushed holy hymn. The stained glass windows cast colorful shadows of the sorrowful mother across our face. It is summertime, and the heat in this massive space is suffocating. Holy water streams from our forehead like rivers. We feel faint, our body dissolving into ether.*

*We are silent.*

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1 This essay is divided into four sections alluding to the four discourses of female sexuality from Michelle Fine’s pivotal “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire” in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol 58(1), Feb 1988, 29-53.

*A linen sundress with faded lilies skims our calves or a sky blue knee-length cotton skirt. We kneel and rise and kneel again. Our knees are sore and worn. We are weary and begin to daydream — until we hear a passage from the Bible. The words, so soft through the microphone, sound like whispers we hear at night when shaken out of sleep. They sound like lizards.*

*“Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves.”<sup>2</sup>*

*That evening when we lie awake in bed, our temples throb like sirens. We feel knives in our stomach and bullets lodged in our chest.*



## II. Victimization

*“I am a victim of introspection.”—Sylvia Plath*

It is natural for them to crave the soft skin of our breasts and smooth curve of our necks. Our bodies make us vulnerable. We must ward off their advances, advances not considered violent, but instead expected, normal. We think about this every day. We watch how high our skirts rest on our hips (when standing, sitting, bending), how low our tops v in across our chest (clavicle, nothing lower), how tight our t-shirts hug our waists (two fingertips loose). Our bodies are invitations in. We try not to bounce too high or bend down too low. We never lick our lips or sway our hips since they are always searching for ways into our shirts, and pants, and brains, and mouths, under our skirts and skin, between our sheets and lips and legs. We imagine them pacing back and forth, devising their plans for entrance and exit. We call them wolves or dogs because they are wild animals that can't help themselves, and we are weak girls, their victims, too weak to escape their clutches. We try to resist. “Things just happen.”

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2 Num. 31:17-18 (KJV).

*On nights that we go to parties, we sometimes drink too much for our stomach and heart to handle. On this particular night, we can feel the Hawaiian Blue Mad Dog slide smoothly down our throat soon after a boy coaxes us into drinking. Mary J. Blige’s “Real Love” is pumping from the speakers of the Embry’s brick bungalow on the corner of Forsythe and Wentworth. The Tinas are there and so are the Jens. They are all wearing short stone-washed, jean skirts with varying single-colored body suits—crimson, cobalt, violet, hunter green. Their bottles of Mad Dog all seem to match their outfits, and we wonder if they planned it that way. Genius— we think. After a half a bottle of Mad Dog, we feel light, like gravity can’t hold us down even if it wanted to. Our arms whirl in the humid air, our face flushed and glowing. We can sense onlookers from the dark corners of the basement, eyes moving to the rhythm of every one of our limbs. We can feel their mouths hot with want and so we smile and dance slower, the way that only girls drinking Hawaiian Blue Mad Dog can get away with dancing with one another. We know this, even in the haze of sweet alcohol and a smoky room.*

*When we spot them looking our way, we know that is it. The relaxed exhilaration we feel on the make-shift dance floor shifts into something else entirely. The wolves are out in packs, and we have to be careful.*

*When we wake to the feel of our knees on grass thick with dew, we are bending forward into the lap of a boy full of want. His face is blurry and his hands are gently pushing our head closer to his naked body. We are moving to the rhythm of his moans when a classmate’s mother catches us in this compromising position. She chides us for our state, peering down on only us on our knees. The boy just stands there. We can barely walk or see clearly when we rise. Everything is a haze. We feel embarrassed and dirty, but never blame him for our behavior. Instead, we become the “weekend slut.” He stands tall and walks away into the night.*



### III. Individual Morality

*“When something bad happens you have three choices. You can let it define you, let it destroy you, or you can let it strengthen you.”*  
—Unknown

We are agents of our bodies, capable and strong enough to make the decision to say no. We are not victims; we have a moral choice to make, and that choice is ours, but if we choose the “other” path, then we should be

prepared for the consequences of being “that kind of girl,” the easy girl, the loose girl, the slut, the whore. If we choose to engage in sexual activities, then everyone will know that we wanted it and that we must be dirty on the inside, no matter how clean we might appear on the outside. We can't wear white dresses to our weddings, and everyone will know why. They'll know a slut is hiding beneath the satin wedding gown. They'll know that her purity has been compromised and that she is lucky to even have a man marry her. They'll feel pity and question why he chose her.

*We have an abortion. We travel to Chicago to a broken, yellowed brick clinic because no one will recognize our face. We have a friend drive us because we will be drugged and bleeding after and our boyfriend is too busy or doesn't have a car and won't understand that we'll be tired and need quiet and won't want to talk or listen to loud heartthrob on the car ride home. We say goodbye to our best friend when she drops us off in front of the broken building and feel better that she will pick us up after. We don't tell our mom or dad. We never even consider it. We walk into a crowded waiting room with girls in sweatpants and no makeup, girls curled on their sides, closing their eyes. We fill out forms that ask us how many partners we've had and how often we use protection and which STD we've had. We are embarrassed, even with no STDs and one partner. We wait. We look at pamphlets that talk about adoption. We wait longer. We read booklets about HIV and HPV and Herpes. We look at pictures of infected genitals, then stare at the off-white walls. We close our eyes and wait. We shift in our seat and rise when our last name is called and the receptionist points to the brown door we must enter through. We hear the door slowly sigh shut behind us.*

*Everything feels slow and distant. We listen to a woman talk to us about “options,” and think about what would happen if others knew. We enter a cold white room and feel pale icy hands push down on our slender stomach and force rough fingers into our vagina. We slowly drift into dreams as a man standing behind us sticks a needle into our arm and tells us to count backwards starting from ten. We see black. We feel lost and dying. We awake to the slow movement of doctors and assistants in masks removing rubber gloves. We see their green scrubs and furrowed brows. We hear their voices, deep and loud. “Wake up, wake up.” They shuffle us to a recovery room lined with twin-sized beds covered in worn white sheets and moaning girls. We can't walk straight, our stomach empty and our head clouded with meds. We can feel our insides pouring out in clumps between our legs. We are padded and sore and nauseated. We think about “options” as we drift into another vacant sleep.*

*We are five years old, seven years old, eleven. We are under the blankets in our*

*lavender or gleaming white bedroom when the door moans open and the dim light from the hallway shines across our smooth pale forehead, our hair a deep chocolate or strawberry blonde or mottled russet brown, the color of the potatoes we peel for dinner. At first we don't wake. We are dreaming, thick dreams about summer, about rain, our hair wet and shining as we stare up into the sky, back arched, heart raised. Our eyes close, and we smile. Then, the pouring sky turns a blinding red. We fear we will be swallowed or turn into ash or dust.*

*It is here, all heart and tangled nerves staring at the blood red sky, that we feel the slow pull of our blanket, an icy opening to our warm body, a body between dream and wake. Our eyes flicker open to a blurry shadow of a smiling familiar face, brown and mustached or pale and freckled or glowing and youthful. And it is in this moment that we don't understand our tense muscles. Our arms and legs seem detached and unmovable. We feel blood-hot hands on our cheek, wet lips on our mouth, a body hovering above us, too close— and heat, suffocating heat, then dark shadows of hair and thighs or clammy hands between our legs or a warm naked torso. There are whispers and hushed moans. Our mouth is full and void at once, unable to breathe, unable to speak. Confused and conscious, asleep and alive, and dead.*

*We choose a space in the back of the cemetery or friend's basement or behind the garage or in the corners of Lincoln Field. We are eleven. We are twelve. We are thirteen. We are sixteen. We are with a boy who is sweaty and smiling. We take his hand and guide him to this space, every once in a while turning back to peek at his lips. They are chapped. They are wet. They are thin. They are full. We don't think he knows we are doing this. When we arrive, we are sweating just as much as he is. The confidence we felt on the walk fades into the shadows of the nearby gravestones or piled high boxes or rusty garage door, or towering oak trees. We shift from one foot to the next. We bite our lip. We look off into the distance. We brought him here for our first kiss. We think he knows this. But now we can't decide if this is what we want, or if this is what we should be doing. We look at his lips again, and move ever so slightly forward. When we begin to kiss, his lips feel slimy, and his tongue darts in the cave our mouth like a snake. We are confused and disappointed, but remain connected until we hear a rustle in the distance. When we walk back holding hands, everything feels different; wilted flowers are sprouting up inside of us. It is the end of summer.*



## IV. Desire

*“We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings.”—Audre Lorde.*

Our mothers don't tell us. They don't tell us the ways our bodies will curve and sway in music or wind. They don't tell us how we'll long for arms and legs wrapped around us, the soft feel of lips on our necks and inner thighs; they don't tell us about our craving mouths and the warm spaces between our legs. They don't tell us to quiet ourselves. They think that our bodies should already be silent. We don't know that we have 8,000 nerve endings<sup>3</sup> hiding in a secret space in our bodies that can swell and explode into pleasure, that this is what this hidden skin is made for. We don't know that our flesh desires wildly, that this is guiltless, that explosions are human, and it is beautiful to have them, with others and with ourselves, that release is freedom. They don't tell us that we are more than vessels, feeders, and servants. They don't tell us, and so we try to deny it all; we try to hide the want; we keep our mouths shut even if our legs splay open.

*We are in our bedroom at the back of the house in the middle of the afternoon all alone. Our mom is napping in her bedroom just down the hall. The house is eerily quiet and creaky. As we sit on our bed listening to The Bangles with the volume on low, our body suddenly remembers how good it feels to be touched. We are not quite a teenager, but have felt the private tingling of our insides before, even when much younger. We know that we have the power to make our body feel a beautiful release. We open our bedroom door, listen for the breathing of our sleeping mother down the hall, carefully close the bedroom door once more, turn down the music to a hum in the background and climb into bed. Our eyes are closed as we slide down our sweatpants and reach our hand into the front of our cotton panties, fingertips slowly tracing the soft folds of skin between our legs, so gentle, so rhythmic until we feel an intense swell and every muscle in our body is alive and erect. Fingers, now earthy and moist, retract and lie still at our hips as we drift into dreamless sleep.*

*When we wake, we feel ashamed, unfeminine, and alone. Every poster on our wall is staring. We want to hide and forget that we gave into the calling between our legs. We want to forget that we satisfied the pulse beneath our skin with the gentle padding of the tips of our fingers. Girls shouldn't want their dark*

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3 Parker, Maggie. “Seven Crazy-Interesting Facts About Your Clitoris.” *Women's Health*. May 6 2014. Web. 07 April 2015.

*insides to breathe and open; our bodies should always stay closed and silent, we think. But whenever there is silence, our insides chant to us beneath our skin.*

*On weeknights, hours after our parents are sleeping, we sneak out of back doors and windows and drive north up Torrence Avenue through Burnham and Hegewisch and the East Side, the street so wide and quiet and empty that it feels like we are the only one alive, the only one moving in the thick summer heat. It is Tuesday. We cruise past South Deering and Bush and end up on Commercial where boys in black and red hang out in groups of two or four—on corners, in gangways, and apartment stairs. We roll our windows down so low that the summer air tangles our hair—sprayed hair and everyone on the cracked streets hears B96 mixes sliding from the open windows. We make a right on 91st and pull in the Gomez parking lot. We know they'll be there. We feel alive and free. We are sixteen.*

*We jump out of the '84 Skylark, push open the splintered glass door, look around quickly, and slide into the one empty orange booth. We order a slice and wait. In five minutes, there are three dark-haired, rowdy boys at the table with us. We are pushed up against the wall, smiling, eyes down, every muscle taut. All we can think about is getting them in the Skylark with us, everyone squeezed in so close that the smell of sweat and hairspray and Drakar Noir cologne and weed become a sweet summer cocktail, so close that we bounce in unison to Dr. Dre and Cypress Hill. We want them in our car, on our velour seats, our legs and arms rubbing against each other and the night. We begin to glow. Kango, Lil Kic, Stimp. Two minutes later. Stay and Johnny. They wear Bulls jerseys and wide-legged black jean shorts that skim the middle of their calves or crisp white t-shirts, cocked Bulls caps and baggy red basket ball shorts. We wear a sundress with tiny orange-red primroses. We know they're bad boys from broken homes; we know this, but we don't care. They have innocent smiles and smooth voices. We want their tattooed arms around us. We want their black-blue teardrops. We want their rough hands skimming the air in dance and ceremony. We want their dark bodies pushed up to ours. There is beating in every pore. They are wild beautiful drums. We want to dissolve into their rhythm and reemerge an untamed, disturbance in the night.*

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