



James Allen Hall

Wholly Fragmented

I think I've been living in a line break my whole life. Experiencing my queerness before I had words for it. Wondering why I always felt like the break in a conversation. Why I always felt like the fissure in the world. You learn to make yourself smaller when you are the fragment. When your wholeness endangers another wholeness—because heterosexuality represents itself as the sentence, after all, and I for one am glad I was not sentenced to that.

Which makes me think I have been considering fragmentation in a wrong way: as piece of something else, as that which remains. Which casts the fragment in the role of an elegy to the blasted monument, as a breaking or broken thing. A fragment need not be broken.

The fragment invites metaphor without surrendering. It is the form of resonating detail. It allows for the gesture toward a wholeness which—if it doesn't exist—the fragment participates in remaking. My thinking here is informed by Judith Butler's ideas of gender as imitation of that which does not exist. Perhaps the fragment gestures toward a whole that has never existed, either. Which would make the gesture, the fragment which resounds past its borders, taking on implications beyond itself, into the whole.

Poets love thinking about fragments, probably due to the form in which we work. Take the word “stanza,” which denotes room, apartment—a fragment of a structure. Can a poem be said to have only one stanza? Or would that be the whole pizza, the entire cake, the complete house? This keeps poets like me up at

night. Even the word “paragraph” derives from Latin via Greek: “short stroke making a break in sense,” so that essayists, too, at the level of form contend with brokenness. Consider further that “para” can mean “issuing from” and “alongside,” and the silence that begins a paragraph is not just a structural marker (begin here) but also a mother. The birth of meaning is not language, but silence.

I think I’ve always been attracted to poetry because of the line break, the fragmenting and powerful silence that comes from the orchestration of sentence and line as dual units of composition. The fragment (line as part of a sentence) is always gesturing towards the whole. Here’s an example, from 2 lines in Susan Mitchell’s poem “Smoke”:

No one likes the child
to point the gun at them.

Because the first line ends on an independent clause, we have enough information to have an emotional reaction: we feel badly for that kid, whom no one likes. Surely, a parent should outlive “the child.” But when the sentence concludes, we have more context and the emotion swivels from the child to whom our hearts had rushed, and now outward to the folks at whom a gun is pointed. The line acts like a kind of focus, an annotating subtext (dare I say, like the aim of that gun which the child points). The fragment moves our attention and emotion and provides tonal array.

Often, the essayist relies on syntax to do this kind of work. Take for example Jo Ann Beard’s essay “The Fourth State of Matter,” about a school shooting in Iowa City. The persona worked with the men who are gunned down during a graduate seminar by one of the students. Beard mixes descriptive and expository sentences with short fragments:

Gang Lu walks quickly down the stairs, dispelling spent cartridges and loading new ones. From the doorway of Dwight’s office: the fifth bullet in the head, the sixth strays, the seventh also in the head. A slumping. More smoke and ringing. Through the cloud an image comes forward-Bob Smith, hit in the chest, hit in the hand, still alive. Back up the stairs. Two scientists, young men,

crouched over Bob, loosening his clothes, talking to him. From where he lies, Bob can see his best friend still sitting upright in a chair, head thrown back at an unnatural angle. Everything is broken and red. The two young scientists leave the room at gunpoint. Bob closes his eyes. The eighth and ninth bullets in his head. As Bob dies, Chris Goertz's body settles in his chair, a long sigh escapes his throat. Reload. Two more for Chris, one for Shan. Exit the building, cross two streets, run across the green, into building number two and upstairs.

Beard's use of fragmented sentences ("Reload"; "Back up the stairs") function as attenuating moments for the reader, but they also give us the consciousness of the shooter, whose voice is everywhere in his actions, and from whose narrative vantage point the scene unfolds. The fragmentation allows us to see and feel the violence and the chaos of this scene unfold in a way that is emotionally true and precisely rendered. The fragments allow for many breaks in point of view—there is a slipperiness and overlap between third person and second person in the essay. The slipperiness travels across and is made possible by the fragmentation. As Heidi Czerwiec notes, "short parsed phrases slow us down" (elsewhere she says "distills") "so we can pivot...without jumping the rails." What is also true is that the use of fragments help Beard craft a double-consciousness—by using the period to suppress and fragment, Beard almost allows another voice to emerge, almost allows us to get into the mind of the man who murders her colleagues and friends.

In the lyric, then, we have the idea of a speech in which cessation, break, is incorporated into the mode of making meaning. The fragment pressurizes speech and acts like a little hand pressing on the language—*you shall not pass*—and the language has to press back to be heard.

Trauma isolates. It lives and lurks in our bodies, in our muscles. It constricts blood vessels. It can, we know, alter us epigenetically. I want to argue that there is a history to trauma, though trauma wants us to think about it as a fragment: a one-off, an isolated and isolating occurrence. To think intergenerationally about

sexual assault is a kind of recovery, since thinking about the pattern that is rape culture makes you realize that it's not (just) the rapist which your work presses back against. In retelling the story of my assault and its aftermath, order is never chronological—it isn't the sentence that helps my rape to make sense. It is the fragmenting: the order was always emotional, not intellectual.

When I write about surviving sexual assault, I want to track not the chronology of my assault, but the modes through which I survived my assault. Those modes were largely lyrical, even as they were also chronological. Chronology is one way of structuring, but it doesn't play true to how the post-traumatic mind (re)experiences its own trauma, or how it make sense of it. In fact, adhering to chronology is so often a kind of violence for the surviving mind, which uses (and perhaps needs) flashes and fragments in order to process the various pieces that make up the traumatic whole. In Brent Staples's essay "The Coroner's Photographs," about the murder of his younger brother, Staples moves between the cold, third-person details of the coroner's report and his memories:

His eyes (closed here [in one photo]) were big and dark and glittery; they drew you into his sadness when he cried. The lips are ajar as always, but the picture is taken from such an angle that it misses a crucial detail: the left front tooth tucked partly beyond the right one. I need this detail to see my brother in full. I paint it in from memory.

We are presented with the fact of the body in description that is distant (Staples describes his brother's face in abstract shapes at first), and then we move into memory, bringing the brother closer, making him not more-or-less real but *differently real*, so that two bodies inhabit the essay: the coroner's photographs are interrupted, annotated, by the portrait the writer makes, using fragments of memory that usurp the propelling narrative. Indeed, at the end of the essay we get a full scene of the persona with his brother—the last time they saw each other. The essay ends back where it began, with the persona recounting how it was he'd come to Roanoke, Virginia to see the trial's files, three years after his brother's funeral. The secretary brings a manila pouch which contain the trial documents and the coroner's photographs, showing

“Blake dead on the slab, photographed from several angles.” The next sentence is the essay’s last: “The floor gave way, and I fell down and down for miles.” Dickinson would call this a plank in reason breaking, or perhaps the consciousness of someone who “could not see to see,” but it is in fact the fracturing nature of confronting trauma—the mind moves from literal to figurative, from rational to emotional, from real to hyper-real, from narrative to lyrical mode.

That move from literal or narrative to emotive or lyrical allows space for others to feel the persona’s reality in a way that cannot happen with the lyric’s transportive quality. Trauma may not be by its nature chronological, but there is a chronology—not just of my life, but of other survivors. It is important for the fragment to see it isn’t the only fragment. This is the way a lyric essay proceeds: it calls together related histories. It begs the silences and gaps between those stories to testify and witness as well.