

tions for this anthology had to give way to what the book so clearly needed to be—a place for people to give voice to their experiences, a place for people to share how bad this all is, a place for people to identify the ways they have been marked by rape culture.

As of this writing, something in this deeply fractured culture is, I hope, changing. More people are beginning to realize just how bad things really are. Harvey Weinstein has fallen from grace, named by a number of women, as a perpetrator of sexual violence. His crimes have been laid bare. His victims are, at least to some extent, vindicated. Women and men are coming forward and naming sexual harassers or worse in publishing, journalism, the tech world. Women and men are saying, “This is how bad it actually is.” For once, perpetrators of sexual violence are facing consequences. Powerful men are losing their jobs and their access to circumstances where they can exploit the vulnerable.

This is a moment that will, hopefully, become a movement. These essays will, hopefully, contribute to that movement in a meaningful way. The voices shared here are voices that matter and demand to be heard.

NOT THAT BAD

Fragments

AUBREY HIRSCH

HE SAYS, "YOU SHOULDN'T WAVE THOSE AROUND LIKE that."

You're in the campus dining hall with your friend James. You've just popped a rust-colored birth control pill out of its slot in the rubbery blue envelope.

You say, "I wasn't. I was just taking one."

He says, "You should take them in your room. By yourself. Privately."

"I have to take them with food," you say, "or they make my stomach hurt." It's been that way since you were fifteen and first started taking them. That was years before you actually have sex and, even when you do, you are so afraid of getting pregnant accidentally that you don't let a man come inside you until after you're married.

You take them because your period is a terrifying beast. The hormones gallop through your veins. You wake up in the middle of the night, twisting; your stomach lurches, your intestines heave. The pills help. You don't like taking them every day, though. Even the smell of the blue rubber envelope makes you a little queasy when you, dutifully, pull them out of your purse at the same time every afternoon to sedate the beast inside.

He says, "Still, you shouldn't let everyone see. You don't want some guy to see you taking those and think he can take advantage of you and there will be no consequences."

You put the pill on the back of your tongue and the envelope back in your bag. James watches as you bring your water glass to your lips. You swallow. Hard.

IF RAPE CULTURE HAD A FLAG, IT WOULD BE ONE OF THOSE BOOB INSPECTOR T-shirts.

If rape culture had its own cuisine, it would be all this shit you have to swallow.

If rape culture had a downtown, it would smell like Axe body spray and that perfume they put on tampons to make your vagina smell like laundry detergent.

If rape culture had an official language, it would be locker-room jokes and an awkward laugh track. Rape culture speaks in every tongue.

If rape culture had a national sport, it would be . . . well . . . something with balls, for sure.

YOU DRINK TOO MUCH AT THE PARTY BECAUSE IT'S COLLEGE and you're always drinking too much. The party is terribly generic with beer pong and a bass-heavy sound track. Everyone is drinking foamy beer out of red Solo cups. You think there might even be a black light somewhere.

Daniel knows you don't drink beer, so he has brought you a bottle of cheap vodka, which you drink mixed with even cheaper orange juice.

You fit around for a while, talking to one group of people, then another. A boy in the kitchen—a baseball player—takes his dick out to show everyone how big it is. It is, in fact, very big.

The last thing you remember is lying down on the couch. *Just to close my eyes, you think, just for a minute.*

When you wake up, you are in a bed in an upstairs bedroom you have never seen. Daniel is in the bed next to you. Your clothes are on, but your shoes are off.

"Hey," you say, pressing into your temples. Maybe if you press them hard enough the pounding will stop.

"You fell asleep," he says, before you even ask. "I carried you up here."

You say, "You carried me?"

"Yeah. I didn't want to just leave you down there with all those dudes, passed out on the couch like bait or something."

"Did you take my shoes off?"

"Yeah. So you could sleep."

Your mouth feels dry. Everything is blurry. You rub your eyes and take in a breath so you can thank Daniel when he says, "I took your contacts out, too."

You don't know where your gratitude goes, but suddenly it's gone.

THESE STORIES AREN'T WORTH TELLING. THERE'S NO ARC TO them, no dramatic climax. There's nothing at stake, not really. You imagine your listener, leaning in, "And then what happened?" And you have to say, "Nothing. That's the whole story." "Oh," she says, her mouth a firm line.

These are little bits of things that happened, or things you think about. They're light on tension, you know that. There's no real peril. There's no resolution.

Still, they stick with you. You think about them even after they're over, sometimes for a long time. Sometimes for a very long time. That's how you know they're important somehow. It's why you can recall the smell of that party, even many years after the smell of your grandfather's cologne has faded from your memory.

WHEN YOU BECOME A WRITING INSTRUCTOR, EVENTUALLY, you end up with stories about rape stories.

The first story is a rape story on purpose. A student hands it in for a fiction assignment in the composition class you are teaching. In it, the hero finds his petite, brunette English teacher alone in a church. He pulls out a 24k gold-plated gun

with a pearl handle, holds it to her head, and rapes her, bending her over the back of a pew. When he's finished, he drives off in a convertible and leaves a bag of money at the police station to avoid arrest.

You are the petite, brunette English teacher. You're only twenty-two, just a few years older than this student who now sits in your office with his hat pulled down over his eyes. You're too timid to call him out on this threatening misogynistic bullshit. What if you're wrong? What if he complains to your boss? What if he gives you a low score on your teaching evaluations? Instead, you critique the story, which isn't hard: It's a horrible story. "The hero is unlikely and the ending is ludicrous." You say all this to your student as he smirks beside you. "And look here," you say, "a slip in verb tense; here, a comma splice."

In the second rape story, the hero meets a girl at a party. She's beautiful, drunk, glassy-eyed, and nearly incoherent. When she's no longer able to walk, the hero, who hasn't had anything to drink, carries her outside, to the beach. He strips off her clothes and has sex with her while she makes soft moaning sounds. Then he dresses her again and lies beside her on the sand.

"The tone is a bit confusing," you tell your student when he comes in for a conference. "It seems romantic, almost. Are we supposed to feel sympathy for this character, even as he's raping her?"

The student looks taken aback, surprised. "He's not raping her. They're having sex."

You point out all of the evidence that he is, in fact, raping

her. She's clearly very drunk. She can't even walk by herself. She never takes any agency, just lies there while it's happening.

The student cuts you off. "This is, like, based off me hooking up with my girlfriend for the first time."

It hadn't occurred to you that the student might not have realized he was writing a rape story.

"All I can say," you say, "is that a lot of people are going to read this as rape."

"But it isn't," he says, weakly, sounding more like he's trying to convince himself than you. "It wasn't."

The third story comes to you in a creative nonfiction class. The narrator gets very drunk at a party. She kisses one guy and another kisses her. She runs away and bumps into an acquaintance, who she barely recognizes through a haze of cheap beer. He is aggressive, putting his penis inside of her while she tries to stammer, "wait, wait."

You start the workshop by asking your students to give a quick summary of the piece. Someone offers, "It's about a girl who goes to a party and gets drunk and hooks up with a bunch of dudes."

Interesting. "Does anyone have anything to add or a different read?" The students shake their heads. "Well," you offer, "I think this first part is a hookup, and the second part, maybe a misunderstanding, but I read this last section pretty straightforwardly as being assault."

All of the students look down, rereading the last section. Some of them tilt their heads, as if to say, *Hm*. The essay never uses the word *rape*, but it does say "wrong." It says "wasted" and "sick" and "dizzy" and "vomit." It says "ignore." How is

it possible they haven't seen this? How is it possible they are learning about consent from their teacher?

The author of the essay is forbidden to speak by the rules of the workshop, but you study her as she takes notes in silence. *Did she know?* you wonder. *Does she know now?*

YOU RECOGNIZE THE TENSION BETWEEN "I AM A BODY" AND "I have a body," but you are unable to resolve it. "Have" implies that this body is just a possession, that it can be lost or thrown away. That you can do without it. It implies, perhaps, that someone else could have your body and that your body would be not your own. That it would belong to another.

That doesn't feel quite right.

But "am" doesn't seem right either. To "be" a body suggests that you are only a body. You are meat and some blood. You are hard bones and flexing cartilage. You are tangled veins and skin. Is that all, though?

You stand in front of the full-length mirror on your closet door and take inventory. Here are your knees; there are two of them. Two elbows. A chin. A torso with breasts that are heavy with milk. Feet. Hands. Knuckles. Two earlobes. Ten toenails. Several dime-sized bruises. Thousands and thousands of hairs.

There are things you can't see, but you know they're there. Two lungs. A liver. The stacked cups of your backbone. Your heart you saw once on an ultrasound machine. Your womb you've seen four times, but never when it was empty. Nerves. Ball joints. The intricate pleating of your brain.

It is a long list, but also, it is not so long. Looking at it now, you wonder, isn't there more to you than that?

SOMETIMES PEOPLE TELL YOU THAT YOU'RE LUCKY THAT YOU have sons so they won't have to deal with all this crap.

It's true that your kids, by virtue of both being boys, will be in a privileged position, but the idea that they "won't have to deal" with rape culture makes you shudder. You very much want them to "deal with" rape culture the way one "deals with" a cockroach problem.

Sometimes you think about what you'll tell them and come up surprisingly blank. It's the words that fail you, not the ideas. The ideas are there.

Though you aren't sure exactly what you'll say, these are the things you want them to know:

It's not okay to hit the girl you like. And it's not okay to hit the girl you love.

The world around you tells women that they should always nod politely no matter what they're feeling inside. Don't ever take a polite nod for an answer. Wait for her to yell it: "Yes!"

Not everyone gets sex when they want it. Not everyone gets love when they want it. This is true for men and women. A relationship is not your reward for being a nice guy, no matter what the movies tell you.

Birth control is your job, too.

Don't ever use an insult for a woman that you wouldn't use for a man. Say "jerk" or "shithead" or "asshole." Don't say

"bitch" or "whore" or "slut." If you say "asshole," you're criticizing her parking skills. If you say "bitch," you're criticizing her gender.

Here are some phrases you will need to know. Practice them in the mirror until they come as easy as songs you know by heart: "Do you want to?" "That's not funny, man." "Does that feel good?" "I like you, but I think we're both a little drunk. Here's my number. Let's get together another time."

YOUR COUSIN TEXTS YOU OUT OF THE BLUE TO SAY, "I JUST GOT raped at the bank."

"Oh my God," you respond. "Are you okay?" Your brain goes turbo. You are trying to imagine which hospital she's at, if she's likely to press charges, why she's reaching out to you and what you can possibly do to make this any less devastating.

The flashing ellipsis appears on your phone to signal that she's typing. Then it turns to words that you struggle to focus on: "Yeah. I deposited my check in the wrong account so I've been overspending on my debit card. I got like \$175 in fees."

You watch for the ellipsis, but it doesn't appear. After a moment you realize this is the whole story. By "I got raped" she meant "I got charged bank fees for overdrawing my account."

You stare at your keyboard for a while, with its letters and exclamation points and frozen-faced emojis, and then you put your phone away. You can't think of a single thing to say.

child is fifteen. The age of consent is sixteen. The punishment for statutory rape in Montana is two to one hundred years in prison and a fine of up to \$50,000. If, however, the rapist is only sentenced to thirty days in jail and no fine at all, how much older than her chronological age must the child have been behaving when she seduced him?

THIS IS YOUR NEW THING: WHEN A MAN YELLS AT YOU ON THE street, you yell back. You are tired of pretending you can't hear these men. You are tired of gluing your eyes to the sidewalk in shame. You are tired of taking it, of treating it like a tax you must pay for the privilege of being a woman in public spaces.

You think, perhaps foolishly, that you can explain your feelings to these men and they will listen.

You wear your resolve like armor and it doesn't take long for you to get a chance to put your plan into action. You are leaving the store, a plastic bag of groceries dangling from each hand, when a man walking behind you says, "Hey hey hey! You are beautiful."

You stop walking and he passes you. It's now or never.

You say, "Can I talk to you for a second?"

He stops to face you, about three feet away.

"Why did you say that to me?"

Instead of answering, he just tries his line again: "Hey beautiful girl!"

"Can I tell you something?"

He doesn't answer, but he doesn't move away. He seems confused, like when you push a floor button on an elevator

JORDANA HAS INVENTED A NEW KIND OF RAPE-PREVENTION underwear. If she orders a batch of five thousand pairs, she can manufacture them for \$2.25 per pair and wholesale them for \$4.00 per pair. If she orders ten thousand pairs, she can manufacture them for \$1.90 per pair and wholesale them for \$3.50. Given these figures, and assuming no import taxes, how will she get the rapists to wear them?

Marc leaves work at 6:25 every evening. Moving at a steady 6 miles per hour, he walks eleven blocks north, three blocks west, and one block south to get to his apartment. On his way home, he passes the diner where Gina works. When she works the afternoon swing shift, she leaves work just before Marc passes by. She walks eight blocks north at an average speed of 5.5 miles per hour. Now that it's wintertime and starting to get dark, how far behind Gina should Marc stay so that she won't be afraid that he's coming to attack her?

Carla is editing her online dating profile. When she adds the word *cheerleader*, her message requests go up by 11 percent. When she changes her body type from "average" to "thin," her message requests increase by 42 percent. When she lists "feminism" as an interest, her message requests decrease by 86 percent and the number of rape threats she receives triples. Assuming she goes on an average of three dates per month, how many hours will she need to spend with any given man before she feels comfortable giving him her home address?

A child is raped in Montana. The rapist is thirty-one; the

and the doors don't close, so you just keep pressing it. Why aren't you shutting up? This isn't what's supposed to happen.

You say, "When you say that to me, I don't feel flattered. I don't even feel angry, honestly. I feel afraid. Did you know that?"

"Why? Why are you afraid? Afraid of me?"

"Yes," you say. "When men like you yell stuff at me on the street, I am afraid that you will hurt me."

"Oh, I'm scary. Is that what you're saying?" Now, he moves. He takes a big step toward you and, damn it, you flinch.

You say, "Yes," trying to plate the word in steel but it crumbles in your larynx like tinfoil. You start walking to your car.

He follows you the whole way, shouting, "Now I'm scaring you, huh? Now you're afraid of me!"

He's right. He is scaring you. You are afraid. But there's something new, too. Before this, you really thought maybe these guys just didn't know how their comments made people feel. You thought maybe they were trying to be nice. But now you know the truth—they know it makes you feel frightened. They like it.

There's still fear, yes, but now there's anger, too. So much anger that it boxes out some of your fear. The next time you yell back to the man yelling at you, it's easier. And the time after that is easier still.

Now the responses roll off your tongue like perfect round stones. You've worried them in your mind and in your mouth until they are smooth as glass: "Why would you say that to me?" "That is an offensive thing to say." "It's hurtful to talk to women like that." "You should never say that again."

Your prize for all this effort is a small thing, but you cherish it. It is the astonishment on your harasser's face. Sometimes he even mutters a flimsy "Sorry" before he hurries away from you. He doesn't want a conversation. He's not shouting at you as a method of engagement; he's just testing something out. He needs to fumble around for his power in the dark, like a totem he carries in his pocket. He wants to make sure it's still there.

Next time, you tell yourself when it's done, this man won't shout so readily. Next time he will see the woman coming, open his mouth to speak, and for one second, one perfect second, he will be afraid of her.