“You know that a boy who likes boys is a dead boy.”

Traumatic Construction of Self in Crush (2005) by Richard Siken

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1. Introduction

Richard Siken’s *Crush* (2005) is a part of the queer literature history, as he writes as a gay man about gay love. The erotic relationships portrayed in his poems are exclusively homosexual in nature, which has made him an appreciated poet among young adults\(^1\). The collection is a part of the Yale Series of Younger Poets and has received The Yale Younger Poets prize, which is the oldest annual literary award in the United States. The collection of poems provides a multifaceted insight on complicated subjectivity, including topics of self-hate, homophobia, irony, violence and desire, and therefore is a useful candidate for examining in the framework of queer theory, and brings light to a fresh viewpoint from which queer works can be studied.

*Crush* tells the story of being obsessively stuck on a love or an experience that is lacking in comfort, safety and possibly a future. It depicts love between men, but that love is mainly cold and abusive – and inherently shaded by homophobia, both internal and external. This fear is the fear of self and fear of outer reaction to self.

1.1 The Continuum of Queer Death

It has been fairly recently suggested that queer minorities carry the trauma caused by societal discrimination from one generation to another, as a part of research on collective trauma, though it needs to be emphasized that this is a recent development in research and is not supported by clear socio-psychological evidence yet. For example, the AIDS epidemic of the 80s is an experience limited to the generation that was active and alive during the years, but the effects of the epidemic carried onto the younger generation born after the most lethal years. The younger generation grew up into a divided society that, on one hand, mourned a generation worth of dead queer people, and on the other, blamed ‘a gay lifestyle’ for said deaths. Queer\(^2\) death became the defining title of the sexual and gender minorities.

The trend of queer death has carried onto the late years as well in cultural spaces. An annual study compiled by *GLAAD* about LGBT+ representation on (American) television in the

\(^1\) For example, Siken’s poems have spiked enormous popularity on community site Tumblr, most popular posts having around 12 000 individual ‘notes’; they are often quoted and used in art graphics. Siken himself has also used the platform a few years back to answer fans’ questions.

\(^2\) The term ‘queer’ is used both as an umbrella category for sexual and gender minorities for inclusive purposes and as a descriptive word, without the intention to come across as a discriminatory slur. It also conveys the way how tragedy shapes the narratives of other sexual and gender minorities as well, though this particular text focuses on the experience of a gay man.
season 2016-2017 found that out of 895 characters 43 (4.8%) identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender³. Worth noting is that, at the same time, 27 queer characters were killed off on various tv series during the year, reported The Wrap in December of 2016.⁴ Even if the numbers describe televised media, it is safe to assume it reflects the reality of literary field, too.

It seems that a queer narrative produced in a heterosexist (or homophobic) creative space tends to end up killing the character off more often than not. The death of a queer character pulls the most intense reaction from the heterosexual viewer, and creates a wave of empathy, humanizing a way of life that has its defining roots in Other⁵; “[w]e only move them when we talk about death”, states Woods (1998, 370). The heterosexist reception to queer narrative has always been one of rejection, and at the same time the tragic queer ends give validation to the thriving heterosexual way of life. Moreover, queer narrative is most often the secondary or tertiary storyline, that can be easily disposed of, says an article from 2016 by The Washington Post about tv plots killing off bisexual and lesbian characters. The meaninglessness of the deaths is often called out, and writers are blamed of repeating tired and harmful⁶ storylines.

Queer death became and still is a defining factor in the production of queer narrative. But the years of the AIDS epidemic were not exactly the starting point of the narration of queer death. Even before that, the queer literature history has had a tradition of death within its thematical borders. It has long been the only way a heterosexist society has deemed appropriate to consume queer media, characters and plots.⁷ Self-censorship within queer literature also reflects adaptation to a heterosexist reality (Woods 1998, 297).

Within the guidelines of heterosexist literary field, queer narration⁸ sprouted works that, even if they were written by queer people for queer people, continued the tradition of death. For example, one needs to look no further than to the acclaimed homosexual writer Oscar

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³ The most recent study of the season ‘17-18 shows that the percentage has risen to 6.4
⁴ It is important to remember that there is no clear information on how much overlapping there truly is between these statistical presentations; a further look into the trend of queer death in television media is needed.
⁵ ’Other’ is a word used to embody something else that is not the typical, normative and expected. It instigates a locus of different and unknown.
⁶ Articles written about queer deaths on media often portray statistics of increases in suicide hotline popularity after a queer death is aired.
⁷ It is important not to dismiss the fact that alongside the tragic narrative, there has always existed an opposing, radical narrative.
⁸ Instead of one queer narration, it is more appropriate to talk about many narrations, but for the sake of the analysis, no plurals are used.
Wilde to come across queer death. Even if his works are regarded as comedic in the literature history, they entail a tragic sense of life, as it is explained by Woods. Wilde certainly is not alone as a queer writer to portray a tragic sense to a queer narrative; Woods calls it an inherent condition that pertains to a homosexual life. He also presents D.H. Lawrence’s novella *The Prussian Officer* (1913) as one as well as Carson McCullers’ novel *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941). (Woods 1998, 217–225.)

Queer writers have long been repeating the tradition of queer death themselves and continued to live within the tragic framework of death. Woods later in his historic narration goes on to list randomly some queer deaths in literature both inside text and outside of it (Oscar Wilde’s sentence, Paul Verlaine shooting his lover Arthur Rimbaud, to name a couple) and throws in dramatically some quotes about death within queer context: “‘Each man kills the thing he loves’ (Oscar Wilde). […] ‘Kill a queer for Christ’ (Florida bumper sticker). ‘If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death’ (Leviticus 20: 13).” (1998, 359.) Wilde’s quote proves useful in reading of Siken’s poems as well. Conclusively it can be said that the queer narrative has only been able to exist as tragedy, in the safety of rightful death, that does not oppose the heterosexist power structures.³

The reality is very much similar between the institutions of power and creative branches. The existence of external homophobia is far spread. From this reality stems the fear of self, internalized homophobia, that every homosexual individual battles at some point in their life. It is an undeniable fact when one is socialized into a homophobic society. Cognitive research has shown that for example both gender and education have a considerable effect on the experience of reading (Kajannes 2003, 71). It is then safe to state that the deep-rooted heterosexism, that is coded into the institutions, has a major effect on the reading process, and the paradigms of homophobia within literature is repeated through writing and reading.

It is important to depict both the heterosexist as well as queer-based continuum of production of arts in the context of homophobia and tragic queer representation, because, even if the conclusive outcome of narrative can be similar, it can be argued that the motivation hails from different roots. The differentiating factor is the source of homophobia – external versus

³ Worth noting is though, that there were clear literary struggles against this tradition of tragic narrative, as writers, such as E.M. Forster with his continuously revised and only posthumously published (1971) novel *Maurice* (1914), navigated the gateway to portray a happy ending to a queer story. (Woods 1998, 218-219)
internal. Heterosexist queer tragedy is external homophobia\textsuperscript{10}, whereas queers depicting queer tragedy is internal homophobia – or at least the trauma that stems from the internal homophobia which then presents itself as a tragic narrative. It is useful to study texts depicting queer narratives shaded by internal homophobia through lenses of representation of trauma, because it is safe to assume the queer community is working through the trauma caused by homophobia with self-expressive tools of art. This way, as a theme, internalized homophobia presents itself in a new manner. Siken’s poems are a good example of representation of a traumatized subject, that has lost his sense of self-worth and agency but is continuously working to regain both.

Before delving in on the structure of the analysis, it needs to be said that to paint the queer life as just tragic is misleading, too. The community is always working towards recovery from distress caused by discrimination and struggle with identity. Happiness in the queer community is possible and real. The outcome of the analysis of Siken’s poems tells that much also.

\subsection*{1.2 An Approach}

The depiction of trauma, as it is to be expected to not be, is not straightforward in Siken’s poems, but it is in fact the end product. The shape of it forms from a multilayered web of denial of self, self-hatred and violence, both outward and self-inflicted, which are themes that are embedded in the context of the collection. Together these elements construct the traumatized self, that then presents itself as a certain kind of death drive, or perhaps, in other words, an obsession to be crushed, either by letting someone else demolish one, or by self-destruction within the poems. The main goal is to examine how exactly trauma is embodied in the complex subject of Siken’s poems; included is the representation of trauma and how that affects the agency of the speaker.

But as a portrayal of traumatized personhood, Siken’s lyrical trauma differs greatly, for example, from a trauma caused by war and how it has been dealt with in the literary field, because it doesn’t necessarily stem from – but oftentimes is interlinked with – a direct experience with abuse or violence. Traumatization from homophobia needs only the mere suggestion of the historical continuous abuse against the represented queer minority for it to

\textsuperscript{10} A fair addition is that post Stonewall’s historic queer riot, there was a trend of writing against the tragic queer narrative, and the death of a queer was used only when it was deemed appropriate to send a political message through it. (Woods 1998, 360.)
install fear into the individual within that said minority. In other words, queer people do not need to experience firsthand discrimination for them to feel the results of said action; they know it is an ever-present possibility and they shape their lives to accommodate the insecurity that comes with it. A study conducted by Ilan H. Meyer (1995) on minority stress in gay men actualizes the framework of experience of chronic stress that comes from the fear of events of discrimination in a heterosexist society; the expectations of rejection and internalized homophobia worked as a function of prevalence to psychological distress, i.e. mental health problems.

The deconstruction of depiction of trauma is approached with three viewpoints in mind. Siken’s poems are thoroughly filled with various materials through which the experience of trauma can be interpreted.

Firstly, I study the experience through the representation of violence, not only limited to physical violence between men, but also the poems’ figurative descriptions of hatred against self, the surroundings and the feeling of being crushed. Anatomical and corporeal aspects of lyrics are also touch on. Through these aspects, an image of the traumatized self is created.

Secondly, I will handle trauma through the experience of loss of agency. The subject of Siken’s poems feels that he has lost control over his life, and this presents itself as surrendering to the narrative, that is maintained by historical continuum of tragedy. The subject struggles to break away from the fixed plot.

The third aspect through which the poems will be studied is the possibility of overcoming experienced trauma. In the poems, the subject is often very self-aware of his unhealthy position in his relationships. The subject understands in various occasions the tragic nature of life and actively voices his resentment towards it, even if the battle against repeating the same traumatic patterns is tough.

Siken’s poems feature scenes and interaction between men – there is a clear absence of womanhood. The collection features a strictly homosocial interaction between men, and there’s a suggestion of hierarchy, that often places the speaker in a victimized and abused role. As Kimmel (2005, 34) puts it, fear controls masculinity, and from that same fear sprouts the subject’s anxiety-filled narration. But outside of that, the speaker also tells a story, which indicates agency, but this agency happens in the strict context of the fixed narrative. A story that has already happened is told so there is very little power over the outcome or the events, which place the speaker in the violent framework of a relationship with a man.
Sedgwick has described the homosocial interactions between men being very patriarchic, and the structures of power encompass both heterosexual and homosexual interactions (1985, 25). While it is true that the hierarchic nature of masculine homosociality translates to interaction between queer men, it would seem more accurate to state that it is not entirely similar compared to heterosexual masculine homosociality, even if they do occur hand in hand, due to queer men being far down on the scale of hegemonic masculinity. The key difference is in the reality of experience and this reality is most complex. Sedgwick describes the nature of that reality as a special relationship of ideological homophobia and ideological homosexuality (1985, 25). All men’s lives are shaped by homophobia (and fear of being effeminate) – masculinity itself is shaped by homophobia and fear of other men (Kimmel 2005, 35) – but the experience of queer men is two-fold; internal and external scrutiny and hate. Men live in fear of being seen as “wrong” (read: queer) (Kimmel 2005, 20), which makes any homosocial relation a hostile environment to queer men. Men feel homosexual panic, or vulnerability to homophobic blackmail (Sedgwick 1985, 89). Sedgwick focuses on the hierarchic homosociality – relationships between men and men – to be the defining factor in every relationship, whether men are present or not, (1985, 26 & 90), but it would prove useful to examine queer men, much like women in relationships, as subjects stripped of agency in the complex hierarchic web. Sedgwick provides a useful description of the unpredictable nature of persecution of homosexuals as a tool of repression and policing (1985, 88).

The violence, that is one of the factors contributing to the interpretation of trauma in the following analysis, is not limited only to direct physical violence. It is embedded into the metaphorical framework, descriptions of body and getting crushed as well as into the figurative speech about the relationship at hand. As Jokinen (2000, 14) has explained, the objective of violence is to control, and for that it does not have to be direct. The reality of violence is that it creates a threat that then causes fear (Jokinen 2000, 13), which is enough to intimidate an individual to submission, and this shapes the construction of the traumatized subject in Siken’s poems.

Another point that needs to be made clear is that the violence in Siken’s collection is violence between men. It is violence that is both received and self-inflicted. Internalized homophobia has its roots tightly knit with self-inflicted violence, that then presents itself as destructive life choices and self-sabotage. It is seen as a part of masculinity to live dangerously (Jokinen 2000, 43), and this relates to Siken’s subject as well, as he is surrounded by sequences in
which his life is in danger continuously. Moreover, self-inflicted violence also includes repression of one’s feelings and needs (Jokinen 2000, 43). Much in the same way, to express a need for comfort or to admit to a weakness is a sign of feminine gayness or insanity (Siltala 1994, 466, ix. Jokinen 2000, 226), which then provokes violent oppression from other men. In Siken’s poems this particular nature of violence between men presents itself in the subject’s abusive relationships, in which he is stuck, because he thinks there is no other choice for him.

This approach to Richard Siken’s poems is based on cognitive poetics (cognitive literary analysis) in a way that it assumes the existence of knowledge within literature. Literature carries data that provides information about reality and an individual’s relation to reality (Kajannes 2003, 53). New Criticism and Phenomenology both recognize the cognitive value of fiction and come in their approach close to cognitive poetics.

New Criticism is firm on its stance that poetry provides unique information about the human experience (Kajannes 2003, 49). The universes of a fictive character and a real-life person are parallel as well as interactive with each other; the text gets its contents from the reality, and the product that is consumed by a reader shapes that reader’s cognitive understanding of the world (Kajannes 2003, 51–52).

Literary devices are also studied within cognitive poetics, and it has been determined that they add to the compilation of cognitive process within fiction. Metaphor both repeats and renovates the information provided through it; if two concepts are linked through a metaphor in a surprising way, it creates a new perspective on the issue at hand (Kajannes 2003, 66–67). Thus, metaphors are deconstructive as well as schematic in nature. Repetition, which is often used in Siken’s poems, might for example represent the way certain themes and things keep returning to a character’s mind, and that tells something about the character and his/her understanding of reality (Kajannes 2003, 58). Metacognitive techniques are also a tool to understanding the text; a character can comment his/her own story, its limits and possibilities (Kajannes 2003, 59). In Siken’s poems, the speaker at times calls out the intended reader on his/her expectations and demands from the text; the speaker recognizes the narrative quality of reality that is being told on various occasions. The recognition is stable throughout the collection, first marks made early in the work: “There is no way to make this story interesting. […] I want to tell you this story without having to be in it[.] (C, 9.) […] You want a better story? Who wouldn’t? (C, 11.)” Same type of statement about narrative is
The nature of the speaker is also embedded into the subjects of the poems, and it is more often than not clear if the two can be separated, but this will be examined later.

Within the presented framework it is useful to presume that information about the homosexual experience of trauma gets passed on through literature as well, and it presents itself at times as a scheme of queer death towards which queer subjects are driven to. The subject in Siken’s poems falls under the assumption in this study, as well. Although the main aim is not to prove that there is scientific knowledge about the experience of trauma in Siken’s poetry, the cognitive literary analysis helps sort out the representation of reality that can be interpreted from the poems and their subject. The queer community, as stated earlier, works through the experience of trauma through arts, including literature. This applies to all forms of literature; the text always says something about the reality it was written in (though this reality is dynamic and everchanging, so the interpretation adjusts to it). The qualitative information that literature can provide should not be underestimated, when literature has been culturally remarkable aspect all throughout human history.

2. Analysis

*Crush* is divided into three sections named vaguely only I, II and III, but each starts with a poem that somehow alludes to the possibility of recovery from something; all three “Scheherazade”11, “Visible World” and “Planet of Love” have an undertone of overcoming a burden, last one having the clearest tension of expectation, and all three will be dissected later in the context of overcoming trauma. So, a sense of recovery is asserted almost immediately, but it is preceded by a journey by various poems12 of traumatic self-discovery with experiences of internal and external homophobia. Both form a web that constructs the trauma together with violent outlook on life and absence of agency. These are the building

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11 Interestingly, Scheherazade is the storyteller wife of the king in *One Thousand and One Nights* (Eng. 1706), in which she stays alive by telling unfinished stories to the king, who thus far had slaughtered his earlier wives in bitter vengefulness.

12 The form of the quoted poems, as they are in the original resource, has been copied to the best of possibilities by the author. Worth nothing is also that the analyzed verses don’t always appear in the correct order, as they are in the original poems, so it helpful to have access the to the original source, but not necessary.
blocks of the self, that is represented in Siken’s subject. The latter aspects will be studied first, and the former – a sense of recovery – will provide the finishing touches to the analysis.

How internal homophobia presents itself in the poems happens through presenting homosexual desire parallel with the adjectives “dirty” and “filthy” as well as compared to “monsters” and “suicide”. These occur in many poems throughout the collection, for example in “Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out”, “A Primer for Small Weird Loves”, “Driving, Not Washing” and “Snow and Dirty Rain”. The subject both narrates and repeats the homophobic rhetoric.

The construction of the subject is not clear cut in the poems. There is the presence of an implied reader, that gets mixed up with the implied author many times. There are many different subjects present in Siken’s lyrical universe, but they seem to represent the same personhood in most cases, constructing a multilayered and complex relationship between the subjects, and thus a hierarchy between them. The poems talk about a “you” and “I” and “he”, but the construction of the narrative often makes them appear parallel; the experiences described dissolve the linguistically different subject positions into one and same – the implied reader, the “You”, the traumatized self, working through traumatic experience. It appears many times that the speaker, is taunting and criticizing the implied reader, and “A Primer for the Small Weird Loves” (C, 22) is perhaps the best example for it. It seems reasonable to argue that the speaker is just another part of the criticized subject; more exactly the internal homophobia in him, that aids in the construction of his traumatized personhood, that is addressed as “you”. Another good example of the complex nature of the implied reader and author is the poem “Unfinished Duet” which – by the title already – describes this relationship – a work in progress. It is a dialogue embedded into a prose poem, that uses typographical ways to separate the different partners in the verses. Three first lines construct the multilayered subject in the poem: “At first there were too many branches / so he cut them and then it was winter. / He meaning you. Yes[.]” (C, 26.) Later the same “you” and “he” resigns to use “I” as he talks with his partner: “Him being you. Yes. Do you love yourself? I don’t have to answer that.” (C, 26.) All in all, it is useful to remember, even if the complex nature of the subject(s) is an undeniable fact, that the subject discussed onwards is one and same; the traumatized self that is constructed in Siken’s poems.

2.1 The Traumatized Self
The poem “Little Beast” opens by pitching together tenderness and violent imagery, that describes the dilemma of the speaker’s life – always stuck in between the goodness of his love and how that love is inherently forbidden.

The radio aches a little tune that tells the story of what the night is thinking. It’s thinking of love.

It’s thinking of stabbing us to death

and leaving our bodies in a dumpster.

(C, 5.)

In the verse, “love” and “stabbing us to death” are parallel images that exist in the frame of the scene, “night”, which represents a covert moment. Night time is usually the most quiet and private time, though this particular scene is “[a]n all-night barbeque” (C, 5). The entire verse is paradoxical in these two aspects; there is the tender idea of love and a violent death, a quiet night, but at a party. The speaker realizes this, too, and voices how the parallel between love and violence is – sardonically – an interesting aspect to bring to a party night: “That’s a nice touch, stains in the night[.]” (C,5)

Throughout many of Siken’s poems, the speaker’s desire is aggressive in nature; he wants to be desired in any way he can be, but the target of his own desire is gorgeous men, who inevitably aren’t good for him. In “Little Beast”, the speaker describes a closeted boy, with whom he is infatuated with: “the way he pulled his body in, out of shyness or shame or a desire / not to disturb the air around him. […] I wanted to be wanted and he was / very beautiful, kissed with his eyes closed[.]” (C, 6.) The subject is starving for validation through desire. Even if his lover is closed off, the speaker wants to make an impact on him, alluding to devastation in the form of “crash test car”:

I wanted to take him home

and rough him up and get my hands inside him, drive my body into his

like a crash test car.

(C, 6.)

In the same verse, the homosexual desire between the subjects is parallel to suicide. The speaker sees the decadent of the nature of his love in his partner: “You could drown in those eyes, I said, / so it’s summer, so it’s suicide, / so we’re helpless in sleep and struggling at the bottom of the pool.” (C, 6.) The link between suicide and desire is a part of the construction of the traumatized self in the poem; love is inherently decadent for the subject.
In the middle of the fifth verse, the subjects of the poem get mixed, and the “he” that is described later is partly the speaker describing himself in third person, as if he is telling an outward narrative. At the same time this third party is personified pain, that is interlaced with the speaker:

the old dull pain, whose stitched wrists and clammy fingers,  
far from being subverted,  
had only slipped underneath us, freshly scrubbed.  

(C, 6.)

The pain within the speaker is something that shadows his relationship, and he is once again faced with the reality of his situation: “[…] the eyes that remained eyes / and not the doorways we had hoped for.” (C, 6.) There is no possibility to move forward yet, so he has to grow stronger to face the adversaries, and the adversary is parallel to suicide, which tells about the serious nature of his situation:

His wounds healed, the skin a bit thicker than before,  
scars like train tracks on his arms and on his body underneath his skin.  
(C, 6.)

The verse indicates self-inflicted violence as well as internalized fear. The fear is not enough to keep him from not practicing his desire but it’s covert and performed only “on the backstairs or in parked cars” (C, 6).

The last verse of the poem creates a bitter discussion of how the speaker views his situation. He describes his life like it’s a fight that leaves him messy with blood but unable to achieve anything that makes a difference. The distress is recurring, and the speaker is asking for something better than is currently presented, alluding to the desire to reject the tragic narrative. He is driven by the desire to be demolished in his love, to let it corrupt him. The poem also equates the homosexual relationship with violent imagery of swallowing glass, punching, blood and desire to die:

What would you like? I’d like my money’s worth.  
Try explaining a life bundled with episodes of this —  
swallowing mud, swallowing glass, the smell of blood  
on the first four knuckles.  
[...]
but we can’t punch ourselves awake and all I can do
is stand on the curb and say Sorry
about the blood in your mouth. I wish it was mine.
I couldn’t get that boy to kill me, but I wore his jacket for the longest time.

Provocation is something that the speaker acquires as a tool to navigate his feelings of repression. The unhealthy aggressive nature of his desire drives him into inviting scrutinizing attention from his abusive lover. “The Torn-Up Road” is an admission to guilt he feels about his situation in this aspect, as the speaker narrates his paradoxical relationship with his lover, to whom he surrenders control willingly: “[…] I wanted to be thrown over, possessed.” (C, 9.) The actual willingness is debatable because of the abusive nature of the relationship. Perhaps he is manipulated by his desire to be wanted to surrender agency away. The subject of the poem is directionless and repressed, by his lover, stuck between him and the idea that he cannot escape it:

And then the sense of being smothered underneath a sack of lentils
or potatoes, or of a boat at night slamming into the dock again
without navigation, without consideration
heedless of the planks of wood that are the dock,
that make up the berth itself.

The imagery of being crushed is linked in the poem – and recurring in other poems, as well – to the looming presence of the abusive lover. Above, it is depicted in the sense of being smothered. Further on, in the poem, the speaker describes being physically pressed into the ground: “[A]nd he threw into the gravel. […] and he held me down until I promised not to run back out into the street again.” (C, 10.)

The violent imagery is also present in “A Primer for the Small Weird Loves”. The third, fourth and fifth verse describe a very direct narration of violently abusive relationships that provide material in the traumatic construction of the subject’s self. The violence is something that the subject does not want. He is not content in the aggressive nature that the relationship always takes. It is also stated how the violence is an everyday matter to him, it comes like it
is scheduled: “[…] The clock ticks from five to six. Kissing degenerates into biting. / So you get a kidney punch, a little blood in your urine. / It isn’t over yet, it’s just begun.” (C, 23.) The same violent acts continue in the ongoing relationship: “He hits you and he hits you and he hits you.” (C, 23.) The subject is resigned in his position, robbed of the possibility to move away, because the man has such vast power over him: “You wanted to be in love / and he happened to get in the way.” (C, 23.) The man has “made a place for himself” (C, 23).

Moreover, the fifth verse of the poem provides another perspective to the reality of domestic abuse. The subject witnesses an outsider exhibiting symptoms, in which he recognizes a history of received violence:

The green-eyed boy in the powder-blue shirt standing  
next to you in the supermarket recoils as if hit,  
repeatedly, by a lot of men, as if he has a history of it.  
(23, C.)

The verse directly names men as perpetrators of violence and the simple description of the boy recoiling, demonstrates that the subject himself is aware of his own situation; he recognizes the signs that bodies communicate, when they are traumatized, and he sees a reflection of that in the boy. However, later he emphasizes the reality of his own problems even more: “This is not your problem. / You have your own body to deal with.” (C, 24.) The physical aspect of the abuse is established, as the speaker emphasizes the subject’s body.

The subject carries the problems with him to other relationships, conveying the recurring nature of abusive tendencies. The negative view he has of himself has been cumulating to make him internalize the idea that he is a bad person and must, then, act like one, which is another sign of traumatized personhood:

The stranger says there are no more couches and he will have to  
sleep in your bed. You try to warn him, you tell him  
you will want to get inside him, and ruin him,  
but he doesn’t listen.  
You do this, you do. You take the things you love  
and tear them apart  
or you pin them down with your body and pretend they’re yours.  
So, you kiss him, and he doesn’t move, he doesn’t
pull away, and you keep on kissing him. And he hasn’t moved, he’s frozen, and you’ve kissed him, and he’ll never forgive you, and maybe now he’ll leave you alone. (C, 24–25.)

The subject repeats the abuse he has experienced, and now performs it on someone else, in an attempt to drive them away from him. What ensues resembles a sexual assault, because the other person is not responding to the subject’s actions.

Furthermore, the complexity of the traumatized self is presented in “Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out”. In it, the subject voices his perception of himself and comes across deeply frustrated with himself. The speaker firstly resists from specific roles and refers to the fact that he is just telling a tragic story: “Who am I? I’m just a writer. […] I sink the boat of love, but that comes later. And yes, I swallow / glass, but that comes later.” (C, 11.) The lines also allude to the fact that there is no escape from the fixed narrative. However, he sees that he has been both the victim and the perpetuator of violence but eventually admits that he is the agitator in the situation: “For a while I thought I was the dragon. […] And, for a while I thought I was / the princess. […] Okay, so I’m the dragon. Big deal.” (C, 11–12.) He is referring to the abusive acts that he himself has perpetuated, repeating the cycle of violence. The poem ends with him asking for forgiveness: “Dear Forgiveness, I saved a plate for you. / Quit milling around and come inside.” (C, 15.)

Returning to the topic of recognizing trauma, there is also an additional case where the subject witnesses another person exhibiting behavior that stems from the trauma cause by the experience of homophobia. In “I Had a Dream About You” the environment is ever-changing and – as the title suggests – dream-like. The speaker already establishes quite early on, that the dreams, that describe everything from having ice cream to grocery shopping, are not truthful – they have been censored to cover something up: “These are the dreams we should be having. I shouldn’t have to / clean them up like this.” (C, 28.) The subject is dreaming about the object of his desire that companies him throughout his dreams: “In these dreams it’s always you: / the boy in the sweatshirt, / the boy on the bridge, the boy who always keeps me / from jumping off the bridge.” (C, 29.) But as the poem goes on, it is hard to tell what exactly constitutes of dreams and what might be real experiences that the subject and his lover have had. The tempo describing the surroundings changes in the second to last verse; the scenery does not change as it did in the first three verses. The focus is now on the lover, who is self-destructive and idealizes suicide:
You had a bottle of pills but I wouldn’t let you swallow them.

You said *Will you love me even more when I’m dead?*

and I said *No*, and I threw the pills on the sand.

*Look at them*, you said. *They look like emeralds.*

(C, 30.)

What is interesting, is that the speaker voiced earlier that he has these same tendencies to self-destruct: “the boy on the bridge, the boy who always keeps me / from jumping off the bridge.” (C, 29.) But at the same time, he refuses to let his lover act on them. Another poem, “Boot Theory”, describes the subject swallowing a bottle of sleeping pills, as well, though his attempt fails ultimately (C, 20).

The speaker dreams of rather ordinary things as well as extraordinary things with his lover, which suggests that this particular relationship is better than the earlier abusive ones. He entertains the idea of returning to a stable way of life, away from the panic. Furthermore, there is clearly something to discover together, “[a] buried treasure”:

Then you wanted pasta,

[…]

We were in the Safeway parking lot.

[…]

There was a show on the television about buried treasure.

You were trying to convince me that we should buy shovels

and go out into the yard.

(C, 28.)

Perhaps, the speaker puts more meaning on their shared relationship and the possible healing power of it, but it is not entirely reciprocated. The end of the poem alludes to this, too, because the lover ends up disappearing from the speaker’s life: “I went to the riverbed to wait for you to show up. / You didn’t show up. / I kept waiting.” (C 30.) “I Had a Dream About You” is in its entirety the first shift in the speaker/subject of the collection; he has realized that the nature of his love should not be so feared.

The feeling of self-actualization, which - as the poems go on – is hard to separate from the description of trauma, gets stronger throughout the rest of the collection. “Straw House, Straw Dog” directly states that his lover is dead, and the speaker is mourning and depressed. The speaker also debates how does he go on from here, realizing that he has options: “So, I
said, now that we have our dead, what are we going to do with them? / There’s a black dog and there’s a white dog, depends on which you feed, / depends on which damn dog you live with.” (C, 32.) “Saying Your Names”, after a listing a litany of different things and voicing aspiring ideas about saving a future, finishes dramatically with “I just don’t want to die anymore” (C, 36) and ends the second section of the collection.

The poem, towards the end of the collection, “You Are Jeff”, provides many verses that describe the inner battle of the subject about his trauma. The poem is the closest one that comes to describing the actual event, hinting at a possible case of child sexual abuse, but the evidence is very subtle:

You’re playing cards with three Jeffs. One is your father, one is your brother, and the other one is your current boyfriend.

[…]

Phone’s for you, Jeff says. Hey! It’s Uncle Jeff, who isn’t really your uncle but you can’t talk right now, one of the Jeffs has put his tongue in your mouth. Please let it be the right one.

(C, 52.)

The tenth verse states that the subject might not be ready to face the trauma: “You see it as a room. […] You’re in the hallway / again, and you open the door, and if you’re ready you’ll see it, but / maybe one part of your mind decides that the other parts aren’t ready.” (C, 53.) It is a common feature in traumatized persons to avoid facing the trauma they’ve experienced, but the subject in the poem keeps trying and returning to the event that traumatized him: “You’re in the hallway again. […] You’re in the hallway. Open the door again. Open the door.” (C, 53.) The poem describes the struggle that the subject has about facing the trauma and taking the steps to start overcoming it.

2.2 Loss of Agency

“Little Beast” provides seven verses worth of melancholic battle with agency, that is restricted by external sources of normative statutes. The speaker knows these expectations and is aware of how his narrative is already decided for him.

The end of the first verse of “Little Beast” is the first time the speaker dreams of the idea of agency. He reflects himself to a man that brings the idea of his lover into existence:
Tonight, by the freeway, a man eating a fruit pie with a buckknife
carves the likeness of his lover’s face into the motel wall. I like him
and I want to be like him, my hands no longer an afterthought.

(C, 5.)

He has lost power over his “hands”, which are the most direct tool for creating something of
one’s own. What is the most significant in the verse, is the speaker’s desire to be like the
man; he wants the same agency, to have control over how his desire is perceived.

The third verse in “Little Beast” describes the historical continuum of the loss of agency that
the speaker is experiencing as well. It gives a form to the continuum, in which homosexual
love is denied by external powers, but it finishes with the speaker’s reluctance to conform to
the history:

History repeats itself. Somebody says this.

    History throws its shadow over the beginning, over the desktop,
    over the sock drawer with its socks, its hidden letters.

    History is a little man in a brown suit
    trying to define a room he is outside of.

    I know history. There are many names in history
    but none of them are ours.

(C, 5.)

The repetition of history is significant in emphasizing its power over the speaker’s reality. It
is even personified into a suited man, in which the societal power over definition of
acceptable relationship is placed, even if these particular powers do not have experience
about the love they deem illicit. The verse ends in a statement about refusing to be a part of
the history.

“A Primer for the Small Weird Loves” is perhaps the most direct description of the reality
of homophobia, that the speaker is living in. It is also the most direct account on the abusive
relationship that he has with a man (or men, throughout the litany of poems). This abuse that
he experiences makes his personhood paradoxical, swinging between desiring love and
rejecting it, sabotaging his relationships on purpose.

The first verse is a scene, in which the speaker is describing getting drowned by a boy; the
moment is clearly from childhood that the speaker is reflecting back to:
The blond boy in the red trunks is holding your head underwater because he is trying to kill you
and you deserve it, you do, and you know this,
and you are ready to die in this swimming pool because you wanted to touch his hands and lips and this means your life is over anyway.
You’re in eight grade. You know these things.
You know how to ride a dirt bike, and you know how to do long division,
and you know that a boy who likes boys is a dead boy, unless he keeps his mouth shut, which is what you didn’t do,
because you are weak and hollow and it doesn’t matter anymore.

(C, 22.)

The boy is getting killed because he desired another boy enough to touch him, and the justification is directly stated in the poem. The fate of homosexual men is listed as common knowledge even within children alongside mathematics taught in school and basic agility. It is common knowledge to know to hide these tendencies that the boy getting drowned has, and because of this, he also understands that he can only die, even if this particular moment never would have happened: “Your life is over anyway.” The fear of homosexual self is instilled early on in children, on the subject, so the trauma is internalized before a stable identity is even formed.

From there, the trauma shapes the subject’s idea of self-worth; it is low enough that he has resigned into a life of being taken advantage of. The second and third verse in the poem bring this forward. The subject’s lover is abusive and sees the subject as nothing more than an object with which to fulfill his needs:

After everything that was going to happen has happened you ask only for a cab fare home and realize you should have asked for more because he couldn’t care less, either way.

[...]

The man on top of you teaching you how to hate, sees you
as a piece of real estate,

[...]  

He’s turning your back into a table so he doesn’t have  
to eat off the floor,

(C, 22–23.)

The subject is objectified and reduced to a piece of furniture, providing service to the man. The fourth verse calls the subject, the boy, “a whipping boy” (C, 23), which is the perfect way to describe his level of agency in the poem. He has been entirely robbed of it.

The sixth verse in the poem references a loss of agency as well. The subject admits having given up any control that he has over himself: “You thought if you handed over your body / he’d do something interesting.” (C, 23.) The poem also brings forward the lack of self-worth the subject feels.

“Unfinished Duet” is another example of how far the subject has drifted from actualizing himself as a person in control. He discusses himself with another person but keeps talking about himself in the third person. His partner is constantly specifying, that the subject is in fact talking about himself. He states this twice to the subject: “He meaning you. Yes. [...] Him being you. Yes.” (C, 26.) Distancing himself from his experience of being in control is a rather direct statement about losing agency in his own life. The multilayered nature of the subject, that is linguistically separated throughout the poems, is a supporting factor to the aspect of lacking of agency.

Another factor that emphasizes the loss of agency the subject feels, is the depiction of how “his hands keep turning into birds and flying away from him” (C, 26). Hands are tools, that make things happen in the most concrete way, and the subject feels the loss of agency like he is losing his hands. The line is repeated at the end of the poem almost verbatim, and the poem ends with: “Eventually the birds must land.” (C, 27.) It is perhaps a hint to the possibility of moving on, and it comes from the partner he is discussing with.

However, the partner might not be a partner at all, but another part of the subject himself, which makes the poem set out to be a negotiation between various parts of self. The dialogue is intimate enough that what develops might as well be a stream of thoughts within the subject, because the partner seems to be very in tune of what the subject wants:

[...]  

He wants
in, he wants out, he wants the antidote.
He stands in front of the mirror with a net,
hoping to catch something.

[...] The voice wants to be
a hand and he hand wants to do something
useful. What did you really want?

(C, 26–27.)

“You Are Jeff” (C, 50–58), with its 24 verses, reads like negotiation between different parts of self that the subject has, or, in other words, negotiation about agency and through that, figuring out identity and perhaps overcoming trauma. The poem marks a clear transition in the narrative; it is at the peak of the tension in the plot. The narrative is constructed by naming various participants in the poem Jeff and including the subject, “you”, into the mix too. The poem describes namely two Jeffs – alongside other factors – to be twins but inherently different and at different points in the narrative:

There are two twins on motorbikes but one is farther up the road, beyond the hairpin turn, or just before it, depending on which twin you are in love with at the time. Do not choose sides yet.

[...] The one in front will want to take you apart, and slowly.

[...] The other brother only wants to stitch you back together.

[...] Consider the hairpin turn. Do not choose sides yet.

(C, 50.)

The narrative itself is in the form of a road. The first two verses separate the Jeffs and their potential to the subject, more exactly, they are two different relationships, but the speaker commands the subject to refrain from choosing which one to pick, because there is in fact a decision to be made here. The decision, perhaps a meaningful turning point in life, is named “the hairpin turn”, and the speaker directs the subject attention to the turn various times. The shape of the turn describes the nature of the inner struggle, because hairpin turns are notoriously known for their acute inner angles, which make it seem like no progress is being made. The two twin Jeffs are at different parts of the road, the older farther up. The older
one longs to be back with the younger one; he wants to experience youth again. The speaker states that the longing to be the other one is mutual and then goes on to say that he is in fact Jeff, which is a direct indicator that the Jeff is constructed of evidently different parts of self.

There are two twins on motorbikes but one farther up the road, beyond the hairpin turn, or just before it, depending on which Jeff you are.

[…]

but each Jeff wants to be the other one. My name is Jeff and I’m tired of looking at the back of your head. My name is Jeff and I’m tired of seeing my hand me down clothes. Look, Jeff, I’m telling you, for the last time, I mean it, etcetera. They are the same and they are not the same. They are the same and they hate each other for it.

[…]

Your name is Jeff and somewhere up ahead of you your brother has pulled to the side of the road and he is waiting for you with a lug wrench clutched in his greasy fist.

(C, 50–51.)

The twin Jeffs represent the two types of relationships that the subject has experienced and what he took with him from those relationships. The tool in the older brother’s hand represents the threat of violence that has stuck with the subject. Thus, both the twins as well as the speaker/subject are named Jeff. The twins actually also take the form of the Devil, which adds a religious pressure on the decadent nature of a homosexual relationship, which has strayed far from rightfulness. At the same time, the twins are contrasted with spoiled sandwiches, suggesting that God too has abandoned them:

Let’s say God in his High Heaven is hungry and has decided to make himself some tuna fish sandwiches. He’s already finished making two of them, on sourdough, before he realizes that the fish is bad.

[…]

They’re already made, but he doesn’t want to eat them

Let’s say the Devil is played by two men. We’ll call them Jeff.

[…]

The one on the left has gone bad in the middle, and the other one on the left is about
to. As they wrestle, you can tell that they have forgotten about God, and they are very hungry.

(C, 51.)

The negotiation about the potential of personhood is then at the focus again, after the poem has established that homosexuality is wrong. The subject is placed at a table playing cards with three Jeffs, and one of them is unfamiliar to him. The subject is coming close to a conclusion about his negotiation, because he is said to be winning the game:

You are playing cards with three men named Jeff. Two of the Jeffs seem somewhat familiar, but the Jeff across from you keeps staring at your hands, your mouth, and you’re certain that you’ve never seen this Jeff before. But he is on your team, and you’re ahead, you’re winning big.

(C, 51–52.)

The poem goes on and on about the subject, and how the speaker explains the experiences the subject has had. The ninth verse places the subject into a room, where he hears his potential lover sing. The tenth verse is, as tackled earlier, the return to the traumatic experience that the subject has had. The eleventh verse reads like an intermission, that builds up the tension about what the outcome of the journey through actualizing personhood will be. The twelfth verse sets the setting back on to the road of self-discovery. Next two verses describe an outward justification for giving self-love a chance and then a return to a casual life in the form of grocery shopping, perhaps alluding to the fact that a person works on their trauma, symbolized in bruises, through everyday activities. The fifteenth verse describes the subject’s ragged nature, that the trauma has caused. The following two verses bring a new lover into the picture, but this lover could be the saving-kind for the subject. Earlier, in the seventh verse, this new lover was compared to a room, and now the subject imagines a room repeatedly. (C, 52–56.)

The eighteenth verse tells the subject that now it is time to decide, and the verse formulates the debate inside a traumatized person:

It’s time to choose sides now.

[...]  

Jeff or Jeff? Who do you want to be?

[...]  

You just wanted to prove there was one safe place, just one
safe place where you could love him. You have not found that place yet. You have not made that place yet. You are here. You are here. You’re still right here.

(C, 56.)

The overcoming of the trauma is not yet possible, and the subject is still stuck in his distress, but the verse is the concrete point in his self-actualization where he chooses whether to give recovery a chance or not. The desire for it is there. The nineteenth verse calls for separation of the Jeffs, and through that the subject understands that trauma is not all that he is: “Here is the list with all of your names, Jeff. They’re not the same / name Jeff. They’re not the same at all.” (C, 56.) Trauma shapes the subject into something else; perhaps this explain the shift between being “a princess” and “a dragon”, as described in an earlier poem (C, 11). The twentieth verse pushes the subject into action then:

Imagine you
are in a field of daisies. What are you doing in a field of daisies Get up!
[…]

What are you still doing in this field? Get out of the field! You should be in the hotel room!
[…]

Ah! Now the field is empty.

(C, 57.)

The hotel room in the poem represents the traumatic event the subject has had, and the twenty-first verse places the subject back in it. This time, though, he faces the situation and lets the one good thing in it to lead him out, his lover’s voice: “Keep talking. I’ll / keep walking toward the sound of your voice.” (C, 57.) The next verse states that the subject was in fact sick, while other people kept on living their own life, giving validation to the traumatic experience he has had: “Some had a party while you were sleeping but you weren’t really / sleeping, you were sick, and parts of you were burning[.]” (C, 57.) The verse goes on to describe the subject appreciating the beauty of life around him, like he is opening his eyes for the first time to it and realizing there is world outside his pain:

When was the last time you
found yourself looking out of this window. Hey! This is a beautiful window! This is a beautiful view! Those trees lined up like that, and the
way the stars are spinning over them like that, spinning in the air like that, like wrenches.

(C, 57–58.)

The second-to-last verse brings the subject and all his different parts together again, but this time it is to summarize what is good about them, even if they represent the subject’s trauma: “Two of these / Jeffs are windows, and two of these Jeffs are doors, and all of these Jeffs / are trying to tell you something. … One thing. Come closer. Listen …” (C, 58.)

What they are trying to tell the subject is in fact that the nature of his love is good, even if the subject still feels like equating that love to a suicide. The love that he has for his lover is something that stabilizes him and gives him validation:

You're in a car with a beautiful boy, and he won’t tell you that he loves you, but he loves you. And you feel like you’ve done something terrible, like robbed a liquor store, or swallowed pills, or shoveled yourself a grave in the dirt, and you’re tired. You’re in a car with a beautiful boy, and you’re trying not to tell him that you love him, and you’re trying to choke down the feeling, you’re trembling, but he reaches over and he touches you, like prayer for which no words exist, and you feel your heart taking root in your body, like you’ve discovered something you don’t even have a name for.

(C, 58.)

2.3 Overcoming Trauma

The first part of the collection opens with “Scheherazade”, in which the speaker asks for a story, or rather a story revisited; it calls for a retelling of a dream that is rewinding to starting point:

Tell me about the dream where we pull the bodies out of the lake and dress them in warm clothes again.

(C, 3.)

The keyword is “again” – this has already happened, and the speaker wants to go back to the start, or an imitation of start. This poem is the starting point before the continuous anxiety that is to follow. It is the calm before the storm, where the speaker is yet to lose himself into
destructive desire. With his companion, the speaker feels fulfilled and undefeated, even if the poem describes the persons inconsolable: “[…] and every time we kissed there was another apple / […] we’re inconsolable.” (C, 3.) Inconsolable, in this case is rather far from its original meaning of not being able to be comforted. The speaker has risen above that, above the reality of his distress, where he so content with it, that he cannot even entertain the idea of recovery. In the messy chronology of the poem, it starts at the end, where the speaker has realized there is something other than trauma in him and his love: “These, our bodies, possessed by light.” (C, 3.)

Light is something referenced time after time in Siken’s poems; “Visible World” describes it in very similar manner. As a motif, in represents the goodness in the speaker and the goodness in his love, but it is hidden and buried deep within him throughout his traumatic loss and rediscovery of agency. The opening poem is a turning point, after which the chaos of anxiety and panic is described – or in other words, after which the traumatized reality of the speaker is described. He does not want to lose the specialness of fulfilling love, even if he is aware of his own distress: “Tell me how all this, and love too, will ruin us.13 […] Tell me we’ll never get used to it.” (C, 3.) What is said within the poem is that the speaker has actually got used to the distress of life, rather than the joy depicted in “how we rolled up the carpet so we could dance” (C, 3).

There is very physical light in “Scheherazade”, too, when the speaker describes his surroundings: “Look at the light through the windowpane. That means it’s noon[.]” (C, 3.) The presence of light links the opening poem with the poem that starts the second part of the collection, “Visible World”. The entire poem creates a scene that is filled with light, both metaphorical and physical light. The setting in which the speaker and his companion is, is surrounded by light: “Sunlight pouring across your skin, […] the bedroom gone white, the astronomical light […] the pink fingers gone gold as the light / streamed straight to the bone […] with every speck of dust illuminated.” (C,19.) In their shared intimate space, the bedroom, the light is present clear and bright, but outside their space, it is denied. The poem actualizes the awareness that the speaker has of his own hidden goodness, through the motif of light:

The light is no mystery,

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13 A quote from Oscar Wilde was referenced earlier: “Each man kills the thing he loves.” There is clearly some assonance between Siken’s poetry and Wilde’s words about the inevitability of decadence.
the mystery is that there is something to keep the light
form passing through.
(C, 19.)

Light is also mentioned in other poems in the same symbolical meaning, apart from the opening poems of the sections. “Saying Your Names” references the light inside the speaker in a strong manner, which suggests that he has recognized the goodness in himself: “Here are illuminated / cities at the center of me[.]” (C, 36.) But he is still restricted by his very own being: “[B]ut I can’t go through with it.” (C, 36.)

The third and last part of the collection opens with “Planet of Love”\(^\text{14}\), which calls for the intended reader, to imagine a scene like it is a movie, and the speaker then describes it. It is a turning point, much like in the first poem of the collection; “it’s your big scene” (C, 39) the speaker calls it. The entire poem is filled with tension, because what evolves is an action scene, where the actor has to make a decision, and it actually is a struggle within himself: “Someone’s pulling a gun, you’re jumping into the middle of it. […] There’s a gun in your hand.” (C, 39) The subject in the poem is depicted in many actors, that constitute the same subject, just in diverse ways, indicating a struggle of agency. The reality of a struggle is also embedded into the ways that the speaker is repeating how he is actually the director of the scene, and “it’s written down” (C, 39) how the scene will end, and thus far the subject has been controlled by this director: “I’m the director. I’m in a helicopter. / I have a megaphone and you play along[.]” (C, 39.) The willingness of the subject to follow the narration is unclear though, and the tension is building as the poem goes along and he has to make a decision, that everyone is eager to – or frustrated to – see:

I’m the director
and I’m screaming at you,
I’m waving my arms in the sky,
and everyone’s watching, everyone’s
curious, everyone’s
holding their breath.

\(^{14}\) It is actually the name of a movie referenced in an earlier poem “Dirty Valentine” : “We’re filming the movie called Planet of Love[.]” (C, 4.) There is definitely intertextuality between the poems, but none of actual relevance to the viewpoint of this particular analysis.
There is a script of homophobia that the subject has internalized and that everyone is expecting him to follow. “The director” is a watchful eye above everyone else, and he is taking care that no one breaks from the pattern: “I say the phrases that keep it all going, / and everybody plays along.” (C, 39.) It is safe to say that the director represents the normative societal expectations and the external homophobia within its works. The turning point described in the poem is the fight that the subject has with his internal homophobia – he is close to overcoming it, though that does not happen during this poem, but it is a possibility.

“Driving, Not Washing” establishes a face-off between the subject and the external societal pressures that keep deeming him illicit:

It starts with bloodshed, always bloodshed, always same

[...] Every story has its chapter in the desert, the long slide from kingdom to kingdom through the wilderness

where you learn things, where you are left to your own devices.

(C, 42.)

It describes the battle against denial of self but provides no conclusive end to it. The poem leaves the battle at a stand-off: “[A]nd they’re trying to drive you into the ground, to see if / anything walks away.” (C, 43.) Furthermore, in the poem, homosexual love is also compared to an unnatural threat, but a few lines later, this idea rejected: “while desire, like a monster, crawls up out of the lake [...] We are not dirty, he keeps saying. We are not dirty.” (C, 42.)

“The Dislocated Room” provides yet more evidence of the subject’s self-actualization. It is another shift in the subject towards moving on from the trauma: “This is the place, you say to yourself, where everything / starts to begin.” (C, 48.) The subject is also returning to the traumatic events that have brought him here, moving from place to place, moment to moment:

Here he is again.

[...] This is the part where you wake up in your clothes again,

[...] This is the in-between, the waiting that happens in the
space between
one note and the next, the part where you confuse
his hands with the room, the dog
with the man, the blood
[...]
It’s happening
all over again.

(C, 46–47.)
Moreover, the speaker directly states: “We have not been given all the words necessary. We have not been given anything at all. [...] Do we mean anything when we talk?” (C, 48.) There is a sense of community that he feels a part of, hence the “we”. He also recognizes the lack of power there is within that community, still; “words” can be interpreted as resembling voice, which has been often robbed from minorities, and with that comes cluelessness. They don’t have the capability of asking what they need, when they don’t know exactly what they need. What ensues is the actualization of the trauma that they work hard on constructing: “They don’t know what / they are doing. [...] They cannot get the bullet out. [...] They’ve been going at it for days now.” (C, 48–49.) The speaker is regaining his agency throughout the poem: “My throat. Mine. Everything in this cone of light is mine.” (C, 48.) He perceives his trauma in the form of a bullet and stares at it against light:

Digging out the bullet and holding it up to the light, the light.
Digging out the bullet and holding it up to the light

(C, 49.)
The moment can be interpreted to represent recognizing the trauma amidst the goodness in the speaker; he is holding it parallel but separate with the good. The repetition emphasizes the meaningfulness in the moment even more.

“Meanwhile” is the second-to-last poem in the collection and it provides a metaphorical shift from night to day, and it is a statement about getting a new start. Alongside that, it describes transition to a hopeful state of mind.

The way it’s night for many miles, and then suddenly
it’s not, it’s breakfast
[...]
It’s simple: it isn’t over, it’s just begun. It’s green. It’s still green.
Green is most prominently associated with a desired man with green eyes in an earlier poem “Little Beast” (C, 5) but a contrasting association is in “A Primer for the Small Weird Loves” (C, 23) in which “the green-eyed […] boy recoils as if hit”. The contrast comes from the way green is the first trigger to attraction towards men that the speaker has, but it also brings along a history of violence, which is embodied in the boy. There is a power struggle between the two affections, but the odds end up tipping in favor of the attraction. The color is after all “green beautiful green” (C, 59).

The last poem, “Snow and Dirty Rain” is an epilogue to the journey of discovery through traumatized self. It is a return to stability and trust with one’s lover: “[F]all toward me with your entire body. […] I’m thinking This is where we live.” (C, 60.) At the same time, it is the speaker’s insight on moving on from his trauma, but it also reads as insight on his community moving on from traumatic background. It is a direct take on how one needs to take agency in one’s life, and how one needs to grow stronger from the distress and self-destruction. There is recovery ahead:

We can do anything. It’s not because our hearts are large, they’re not, it’s what we struggle with.

[…]

a gentleness that comes, not from the absence of violence, but despite the abundance of it.

(C, 60.)

The speaker wants to emphasize that there is another, untold story of joy, underneath the traumatic journey that has been told: “It’s a fairytale, / the story underneath the story[.]” (C, 61.) What unravels is the recognition that the subject needs to live his life, despite the experienced trauma:

I’m alive, but monsters are always hungry, darling, and they’re only a few steps behind you, finding the flaw,

[…]

the place they could almost
slip right through if the skin wasn’t trying to
keep them out, to keep them here, on the other side

(C, 61.)

The poem, and the collection ends with a powerful note on overcoming both the personal and the collective trauma surrounding the intended audience: “We are all going forward. None of us are going back.” (C, 62.)

3. Conclusion

Richard Siken’s poems feature a multilayered subject, that is continuously under criticism for his surrendering to a narrative of tragedy. The traumatized subject is formed through themes of recurring abuse and loss of agency but eventually, after rigorous negotiation with self, is presented with the opportunity to overcome trauma. The trauma in question is rooted in societal external homophobia that is then performed through internal homophobia as multifaceted violence, that is both experienced as well as self-inflicted and performed on others by the subject represented in the poems. The violence shapes the subject’s relationships, that are described in the poems, and a tragic paradigm for them is settled, until the work towards recovery starts, and the subject breaks away from the scheme.

What develops is a narration of tragedy that inherently ends up rejecting the expected unhappy outcome, that many other preceding queer experiences have had. Richard Siken has built a story of overcoming tragedy within the framework of tragedy. What results is reconstructed and empowered self that, though previously was deeply traumatized, is now in a fresh mindset to move forwards with his life.

In the end, Siken’s collection ends in a rather joyful note, which is remarkable in the continuum of queer literature. It is a part of a larger sentiment, that clearly is striving away from the established narrative of tragedy. What has been, and still is, compiling throughout the 21st century amongst queer literature is the aim to break away and create a new happier narrative for queer literature. Most strongly this can perhaps be seen in the field of fan fiction, that is an ever-growing form of popular literature; a quick look at the most popular main categories (tags) of a popular fan fiction site Archive of Our Own, tells that the most common
one is “fluff” with over 600 000 hits; right after that is “angst” with over 400 000 hits. What this means is that the starvation for happy endings exists together with the sense of tragedy, which proposes the question if there is an opportunity to study the field further within this theme. Questions about a further look into the tradition of queer death and the eventual steering away from it stand, and they are worth looking into.

Bibliography

Primary references


Secondary references


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15 Not all of the hits feature exclusively queer characters or relationships, but they form the majority of the works on the website; female/male relationships have been tagged over 900 000 times, whereas collectively, male/male and female/female relationships have been tagged over 2,1 million times, m/m making most of them.