

2019

## Telling the Truth About Sibling Abuse: Domestic Violence in Julie Barton's *Dog Medicine* and Tara Westover's *Educated*

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### Recommended Citation

Robillard, Amy E. (2019) "Telling the Truth About Sibling Abuse: Domestic Violence in Julie Barton's *Dog Medicine* and Tara Westover's *Educated*," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.  
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## Telling the Truth About Sibling Abuse: Domestic Violence in Julie Barton's *Dog Medicine* and Tara Westover's *Educated*

If I live in a world in which my experience is not reflected back to me, then maybe I'm not real enough; maybe I'm not real at all. Maybe I'm fiction.... That is a trauma: to see yourself never in the world. To feel yourself so unspeakable, forbidden, dangerous.

—Dorothy Allison, “A Cure for Bitterness”

Much has been written—and surely, much will continue to be written—about the powerful testimony unleashed in October, 2017, with the rebirth of #MeToo. For instance, Leigh Gilmore argues that the flood of stories that began with Harvey Weinstein's downfall and continues to this day functions to disrupt the old narrative of “He Said/She Said” by amplifying women's voices in ways that expose “the scale of women's experiences of sexual abuse” and enable “participation by offering safety in numbers” (2). Gilmore notes that the “He Said/She Said” narrative works because “scales of justice tip toward the empowered, not only in the outcomes produced, but also in the attribution of doubt to victims of sexual violence” (2). The sheer numbers and the possibility of anonymity with #MeToo function to tip the scales back in favor of victims.

Like the opportunity provided by #MeToo, life writing—personal essays and memoirs especially—offers survivors of violence an opportunity to testify to their experiences in ways that challenge commonplace conceptualizations of violence as “senseless”; indeed, Megan Brown demonstrates in her recent work on three memoirs by women that life writing offers an opportunity to attempt to “reveal, imagine, or impose a certain ‘sense’ on the crimes they describe, some way of seeing and understanding developments through a psychological or sociological lens” (2). James Gilligan has written extensively on the sense that violence makes to the perpetrator of violence, a kind of sense that those who do not commit violence usually cannot understand; he characterizes it as “so senseless as to defy our efforts at comprehension through the usual means and the ordinary assumptions of rational thought, common sense, and self-interest” (62). Violence, he writes, has its own symbolic logic (61).

The violence in the memoirs Brown examines includes rape, murder, and incest, all confounding to those who want to but probably will never be able to understand, how a perpetrator can do such things to innocent victims. But as Brown writes, understanding the why isn't necessarily the authors' goal; she writes, “Rather than longing to help their families—or themselves—heal, or a desire to learn the whole ‘truth,’ or reach some definable end point, Marzano-Lesnevich, Connors, and Nelson instead focus on narrative as a complicated but necessary way of processing what is, ultimately, unknowable” (21-22). The telling is what matters; the sense-making is in the telling.

It has become commonplace to point out that violence begins at home, to say that one of the most dangerous places for a pregnant woman to be is her home, that the most dangerous time for a woman in an abusive relationship is when she is leaving or about to leave her partner. One form of domestic violence, by some accounts the most common form of domestic violence, is the subject—though not the nominal subject—of two recent memoirs by women, and it is to that form of violence that I want to turn attention in this essay. Julie Barton’s 2015 memoir, *Dog Medicine*, is described as a love story in which a sweet dog named Bunker saves the author from a crippling depression. Tara Westover’s 2018 *Educated: A Memoir* is characterized as the story of a girl who escapes her survivalist upbringing to enter a classroom for the first time at the age of seventeen. As girls, both Barton and Westover are abused by older brothers. Both unsuccessfully appeal to their parents for help. Both memoirs represent sibling abuse in complex ways, providing a rich and valuable opportunity to spark a cultural conversation about the lifelong damage done by sibling abuse. But that opportunity is overshadowed by the more culturally palatable narratives of, in Barton’s case, clinical depression, and in Westover’s case, escaping a survivalist upbringing to get an education. Though rendered in terrifying detail and gripping narrative, Barton’s and Westover’s stories of sibling abuse remain metaphorical footnotes in critical reviews, with the effect that sibling abuse remains left out of cultural conversations. My goal here is to counter that effect, to insist that sibling abuse be made part of the conversation in ways that these writers’ memoirs not only suggest but, quite frankly, demand.

### Sibling Abuse is Domestic Violence

Readers might be surprised to learn that sibling abuse is the most common form of violence in families; it is in fact, “much more prevalent than serious child abuse by parents” (Kiselica and Morrill-Richards 148). Indeed, Kiselica and Morrill-Richards report that “Strauss and Gelles, the authors of the most definitive study of violence in families in the United States ever undertaken, concluded, ‘Children are the most violent persons in American families’” (148). Sibling abuse is generally characterized as physical abuse (“threatening sibling with an object; hitting, kicking, or smashing an object; throwing objects at sibling; tickling in an abusive way; pushing; grabbing; shoving; kicking; threatening with or using gun or knife); emotional or psychological abuse (“teasing, ridiculing, name-calling, etc.”) (Kettrey and Emery 408); and/or incest.

Heather Hensman Kettrey and Beth C. Emery are among the many researchers who note that one of the principal problems with sibling abuse is the minimalization of it as not a serious problem. They cite Wiehe, who found “that parental responses to abuse within the sibling relationship could be classified into the following categories: ignoring or minimizing the abuse, blaming the victim, inappropriately responding to the behavior, joining in the abuse, disbelieving the abuse was occurring, and indifference” (409). Kettrey and Emery go on to note that

their review of literature suggests that “the dominant discourse regarding sibling violence is inconsistent and tends to reflect the attitude that sibling violence is not a serious problem” (409). Indeed, it should surprise no readers of this work that the most common term used to characterize abuse between siblings is that of *rivalry*, a word that minimizes “acts of aggression that would otherwise be considered assaults in any other family or personal relationship” (Eriksen and Jensen 498).

There are two primary effects of this minimalization of sibling abuse: the first is that survivors do not recognize what is happening to them *as abuse*; as Kettrey and Emery explain, “Individuals who experience violent acts at the hands of a sibling may ignore the reality of their experience by conforming to a dominant discourse that does not recognize this as a form of violence or abuse.” The second, and obviously related effect, is that, “the dominant discourse permits these acts to continue while rendering them invisible” (409).

In her essay, “Aftermath,” Rachel Cusk writes that she has “wondered from time to time whether it is one of the pitfalls of modern family life, with its relentless jollity, its entirely unfounded optimism, its reliance not on God or economics but on the principle of love, that it fails to recognize—and to take precautions against—the human need for war.” The research on sibling abuse that I’ve cited here would suggest that Cusk is on to something; Barton and Westover’s experiences as represented in their memoirs would seem to confirm as much.

My analysis of Barton’s and Westover’s memoirs focuses on representations of sibling abuse and the ways in which dominant discourse, as represented by published reviews of each memoir, minimizes the significance of such violence, opting instead to represent the memoirs as narratives about depression and education, respectively.

### Julie Barton is Saved from Crippling Depression

*Dog Medicine*, subtitled, *How My Dog Saved Me from Myself*, opens with Barton’s breakdown at age twenty-two in New York City. Originally from the Midwest, she tells readers, Barton always felt somehow wrong, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on the problem. “I watched a lot of television and decided that I was a big-city girl—not an Ohio girl. It was all a simple mistake of geography. I couldn’t pin my malaise on my happily married parents. My brother and I fought, badly, but that, I thought, was normal. It would take this breakdown and several years of therapy to realize that it wasn’t” (5). Here we have the first hint that the abuse by her brother is *the cause* of the depression that leads to her breakdown in her early twenties. But at the time of the breakdown, she cannot see that. Instead, she believes that there is something wrong with her, that perhaps it has something to do with her recent breakup with Will, her boyfriend.

Having blacked out on her kitchen floor after trying to make pasta on the stove, Barton wakes up blinded in a fog of smoke.

I became aware that I was sobbing. I'd been on the kitchen floor all night. I coughed and wheezed. My teeth clenched. The sorrow rushed in so fiercely that I imagined it might vaporize me, burst me into millions of tiny molecules. The terrible, lonely, indescribable feeling that had lingered just beneath my skin for so long had finally taken over. As I wept, the thoughts came: *You're so stupid. Get up and go to work like everyone else in the world. What makes you think you're so special that you get to lie on the floor all day?* (7)

Barton calls her mother, who insists on coming to get her in the city. "I was twenty-two, one year out of college, full of promise yet unable to function. I have since learned to call this feeling depression, but then I had no name for it. It was a presence, a haunting, and it had taken over. It squatted on my chest, telling me to do everyone a favor and just go" (8). This was a voice inside her head, a voice that had been put there many years ago, the voice of abuse.

Early in the memoir, Barton gives us a complicated picture of her brother Clay:

Many older brothers are mean and unhappy. I didn't think it was out of the ordinary that mine called me names: bitch, whore, loser, idiot, ugly, weirdo, fuck-face. And he hit me. Hard. He spit in my face. He pushed me down. He stepped on me. He pulled my hair. He chased me with knives. I didn't understand that Clay was struggling. I thought that this was how all older brothers behaved. I didn't know that our father's long hours at work affected him, or that our mother's emotional disconnectedness left him adrift. I just knew that he hated me, that I could do nothing right in his presence, that I was unsafe in my own home. It didn't help that I was an intensely sensitive kid. I imagined that my stuffed animals had feelings, so I read them Beatrix Potter books and then gently tucked them in bed. (11)

Before readers get a clear picture of the kind of abuse Clay subjects Barton to, we are already getting a form of minimalization in the form of the adult Barton explaining the psychological reasons for Clay's abuse.

Just a couple short chapters later, Barton narrates a harrowing scene in which Clay tears the door off of her room in order to attack her. "I was ten, my brother thirteen, and we were fighting again. He chased me down the hallway to my bedroom. I leapt into my bedroom, breathless. There was just enough time to slam the door and lock it." Barton explains that she can hear Clay kicking and punching the door as she sits in fear on her bed. Her mother is outside, her father at work. She continues:

With each hit or kick, Clay yelled obscenities like "Fucking bitch! I'm going to fucking rip your *head* off!" I saw the top left panel of the door splinter first, and then the whole thing came off its hinges. The

door split from the doorjamb and drifted inward, landing with a barely perceptible thud on my lime-green carpet. A tree falling in the forest. He lunged at me on my white wicker bed with the eyelet sheets, punching my arm, pinning me down, and adjusting his fist so his middle knuckle stuck out as he punched the same spot over and over again. I slid down, my head pressed so hard against the flowered wallpaper that one ear began to ring. My hair snagged on the wicker headboard. (17)

Once Clay finally leaves, Barton runs to find her mother, to share her incredulity not that Clay had beat her up but that he had tore her door off its hinges. “Just stay away from him,” she sighed. She took a towel and held it to her face, pulling in a deep breath. My mother hated our fighting. She didn’t understand it and couldn’t make us stop” (18).

When she goes back to her room, Barton sees that Clay has written all over her doorjamb.

“Loser,” “Lesbian,” “Whore,” and “Everyone Hates You.” I gasped. I was upset that he’d written these words, but more terrified that someone might see them. Because what Clay thought about me, I thought about myself. He was older, stronger, smarter. I had no proof of anything else, and I feared that my parents and friends would see the graffiti and agree with him.

Clay was no longer just a voice in Barton’s head; he was literally writing that voice on the space where she was supposed to feel safe. And she couldn’t erase those words; “Clay had written in pen and with such pressure that the letters were carved into the wood” (19).

When the family adopts a puppy named Blarney when Barton is nine years old, Clay, noticing that Barton connects easily with the puppy, torments the puppy in front of her. He would “bump her, push her down so that her long, spindly legs splayed out in all four directions, her claws scratching the hardwood floor in resistance. But I also remember seeing him snuggle with her on the floor in front of the television when he thought I wasn’t watching” (55).

During her senior year in college, Barton sees a therapist who works to persuade her that what she suffered at the hands of her brother was abuse. Her therapist convinces her that she needs to confront him, that his treatment of her was *not* normal, and that he needs to know that what he did to her was unacceptable, that it had a lasting effect on her. Though it takes some time to persuade her, eventually Barton decides that she will confront him.

That weekend, she does just that. “I’ve been talking with my therapist,’ I said, shaking slightly, squeezing my flattened, sweaty palms together. ‘And I want to tell you that the way you treated me over the years has really hurt me and she says it even qualifies as abuse. Like, sibling abuse,’ I said.” His response was to shout at her. “Fuck you! He screamed, potato chips flying from his teeth to my bedspread. He

swallowed hard, then hissed, ‘Jesus Christ, you fucking *bitch!*’ He walked toward the door, cursing under his breath, ‘Holy fucking *Christ!*’”

And it’s then that Barton realizes that the abuse has always been about Clay; it has always been about his own hurt. “What I saw in that moment, in his reaction, felt like a revelation. *He* was hurt. And it wasn’t because of anything I said; it was because of something in him. Something made him feel so terrible that he took it out on me. His overly emotional reaction pulled the first veil off our troubled relationship. I was old enough to see that his hurting me stemmed from his own pain” (81).

Much of the memoir, of course, is the story of Bunker Hill, the dog Barton adopts, the dog whose love Barton credits with saving her life when she found herself at her lowest point. That story has been told in the blurbs and in the reviews—indeed, it is in many ways a story that many of us could tell, as it fits a cultural script of redemption from suffering—so I won’t recount it here. What I do want to do, instead, is jump to the end of the memoir, when Barton reflects again on the lifelong effects of sibling abuse. She writes,

My job, after beginning to understand that my brother’s abuse had nothing to do with me, was to try, again and again, to stop carrying it inside my own mind. It would become a lifelong mindfulness practice for me, to not draw immediate, negative, judgmental, sad conclusions about every single move I made. My job is still to work my entire life to stop the self-hate. Bunker was my first and most influential teacher in this regard. (225)

The effects of sibling abuse are indeed long-lasting, so long-lasting that even Bunker, the purported subject of the memoir, is characterized as only a first step toward healing. Sibling abuse caused a depression too overwhelming for even the unconditional love of a dog to overcome.

Finally, I want to point to what Barton writes about sibling abuse itself as a form of domestic violence. After letting readers know that Clay is “a good man. He’s a loving man. He’s going to be okay,” Barton writes,

I have forgiven Clay, but I will make sure that my story is never forgotten. Too many siblings are getting hurt and hurting each other. Sibling violence is one of the last sanctioned forms of domestic abuse. Parents often say that kids just hit each other. While some aggression between siblings is inevitable, parents need to be equipped with ways to intervene and stop the fighting before it turns into serious physical, emotional, or verbal abuse. Physical fighting should never be allowed. No child should be permitted to regularly intimidate, torture, or hurt his or her sibling, because the effects of this kind of treatment will last a lifetime. (228-9)

Barton calls sibling violence “the last sanctioned form of domestic violence,” but I could not find a single review that picks up on that line to make something of it.

Instead, I found review after review that focused on Barton's representation of severe depression; indeed, these reviews' characterizations of Barton's depiction of depression were the reason I bought the memoir in the first place.

The *New York Times* characterizes *Dog Medicine* as "the story of [Barton's] struggle with clinical depression, and perhaps it should have been called 'Amazing Grace': Barton was lost, and now she's found, and what found her was not God but a golden retriever named Bunker" (Newman). Michelle Anne Schingler begins her Foreword Review by saying that the memoir "takes on the stigmas surrounding mental illness and medication, while also crediting a very specific canine hero." The Foreword Review characterizes sibling abuse as an environmental factor: "It also addresses environmental factors, and the grace with which Barton navigates her complicated and often abusive relationship with her brother bespeaks great authorial maturity." Rather than pointing to Barton's depiction of the abuse as an opportunity for initiating a cultural conversation about sibling abuse, Schingler instead uses it as a means of complimenting Barton's skill as a writer.

The Kirkus review of *Dog Medicine* characterizes the memoir as one in which "a chronically depressed short story writer tells how her relationship with her dog saved her life." This review, too, mentions Barton's relationship with her brother, though it characterizes it simultaneously as *abuse* and *rivalry*: "What seeds in the author's life grew such poisoned fruit? Barton writes that her brother often physically and verbally abused her and undermined her parents' attempts to deal with sibling rivalry. The author unmask[s] the hidden face of domestic violence, writing that her brother once pushed her so hard that she ended up cracking her head, lying unconscious in a pool of her own blood." If the author unmask[s] it, the review works to hide it again when it sums the book up as "a heartfelt page-turner about depression and how dogs can save us from ourselves." The author of the review addresses the issue of sibling abuse, going so far as to call it domestic violence, and then retreats to characterizing the memoir as a heartfelt page-turner about the healing powers of dogs. This is dominant discourse at work.

In an interview with Barton published on the website *Sweatpants & Coffee*, Jordan Rosenfeld characterizes the memoir as one that "chronicles her descent into deep depression in her twenties and how the love of one remarkable dog helped to pull her out." Rosenfeld asks Barton twelve questions, not one of which is about sibling abuse. The first one, unsurprisingly, is about depression, which she says "feels like an invisible epidemic." She then asks Barton, "Do you think we have enough of a cultural conversation going about depression in young adults?" Rosenfeld asks Barton specifically about her relationship with Bunker, about human-animal relationships, and about the risks of writing memoir more generally. She asks Barton how her family responded, which one might read generously as a question about sibling abuse. In any case, Barton takes the question that way and says that her brother "has been utterly gracious, giving, selfless, and kind." She goes on to say that "I think his generosity will probably help a lot of families start a lot of important

conversations, and even perhaps prevent some harm from happening to siblings now coming of age.”

But the story of sibling abuse is one we don’t know how to integrate into our understanding of how families are supposed to work; we do not know how to respond to it. So usually, we don’t. Instead, we respond to stories about depression because it feels good to say that we’re fighting the stigma, or we respond to stories about a dog’s love because who can’t relate to that?

### Tara Westover Goes to School

Tara Westover’s *Educated: A Memoir* does not begin in abuse the way Barton’s does; instead, it begins with descriptions of life in the mountains of Idaho with a large family ruled by a paranoid survivalist father and a dubious mother responsible for homeschooling the children. The youngest of seven children, Tara has no formal schooling and does not, as any review will tell readers, step into a classroom until she is seventeen years old. Homeschooling, however, falls by the wayside by the time Tara comes along, and mostly consists of the children reading whatever they can find in the house—religious materials or an old science textbook for children. Most of their time is spent working in the family junkyard or helping Mother with her oils and tinctures.

The abuse begins approximately one-third of the way into the memoir, when Westover is fifteen. Readers have already met her older brother Shawn (a pseudonym) and understand that Westover has a complicated relationship with him. We have seen Shawn save Tara from a dangerous situation while breaking in horses together and we have seen them form a sibling bond while trucking long-haul across the country together in their older brother’s big rig. But not long after that trip, Shawn begins terrorizing Westover at home in ways that cannot be described as anything other than abuse. The first time Westover describes it happening, Shawn demands Westover get him a glass of water or he won’t drive her to town the next day. Before this scene, it’s important to point out that Westover has been describing the ways Shawn would torture his girlfriend Sadie by asking for a glass of water and, when she’d bring it, saying he wanted ice. When she brought that, he’d say he’d wanted milk. “This could go on for thirty minutes before, in a final test, he would ask for something we didn’t have. Then Sadie would drive to town to buy it—vanilla ice cream, fries, a burrito—only to have him demand something else the moment she got back” (109).

I fetched the water. As I handed it over, I saw the smile on his face and without thinking dumped the whole thing on his head. I made it down the hall and was nearly to my room when he caught me.

“Apologize,” he said. Water dripped from his nose onto his t-shirt.

“No.”

He grabbed a fistful of my hair, a large clump, his grip fixed near the root to give him greater leverage, and dragged me into the bathroom. I groped at the door, catching hold of the frame, but he lifted me off the ground, flattened my arms against my body, then dropped my head into the toilet. “Apologize,” he said again. I said nothing. He stuck my head in further, so my nose scraped the stained porcelain. I closed my eyes, but the smell wouldn’t let me forget where I was.

When he lets her up and she thinks it’s over, he grabs her wrist. “I’d begun to back away when he seized my wrist and folded it, curling my fingers and palm into a spiral. He continued folding until my body began to coil, then he added more pressure, so that without thinking, without realizing, I twisted myself into a dramatic bow, my back bent, my head nearly touching the floor, my arm behind my back” (110). Shawn continues twisting Westover’s wrist until she feels like she’s going to break and she finally says, “I’m sorry.”

In the next abuse scene, their mother is present, a point that will become important later in the memoir.

I awoke with needles in my brain. Thousands of them, biting, blocking out everything. Then they disappeared for one dizzying moment and I got my bearings.

It was morning, early; amber sunlight poured in through my bedroom window. I was standing but not on my own strength. Two hands were gripping my throat, and they’d been shaking me. The needles, that was my brain crashing into my skull. I had only a few seconds to wonder why before the needles returned, shredding my thoughts. My eyes were open but I saw only white flashes. A few sounds made it through to me.

“SLUT!”

“WHORE!”

Then another sound. Mother. She was crying. “Stop! You’re killing her! Stop!”

She must have grabbed him because I felt his body twist. I fell to the floor. When I opened my eyes, Mother and Shawn were facing each other, Mother wearing only a tattered bathrobe.

I was yanked to my feet. Shawn grabbed a fistful of my hair—using the same method as before, catching the clump near my scalp so he could maneuver me—and dragged me into the hallway. My head was pressed into his chest. All I could see were bits of carpet flying past my tripping feet. My head pounded, I had trouble breathing, but I was starting to understand what was happening. Then there were tears in my eyes. (115-16)

What stops this episode is not their mother but the arrival of their brother Tyler (not a pseudonym), who had been away at college.

Westover credits Tyler for her initial interest in and her eventual decision to go away to college, which is a story I won't relay here because it is glossed in reviews and is worth reading in its own right. But even after she has gone away to school, she returns home and the abuse doesn't end. One particularly harrowing scene occurs on one of Westover's visits home when she and Shawn are in the parking lot of a grocery store. Shawn wants her to come into the store with him; she doesn't want to. They both have seen that Westover's ex-boyfriend Charles is in the store, and Westover doesn't want to see him. Shawn, of course, wants to humiliate her in front of Charles. He pulls her out of the car and onto the pavement.

I feel icy pavement on my back; pebbles are grinding into my skin. My jeans have slid down past my hips. I'd felt them peeling off me, inch by inch, as Shawn yanked my legs. My shirt has risen up and I look at myself, at my body spread flat on the asphalt, at my bra and faded underwear. I want to cover myself but Shawn has pinned my hands above my head. I lie still, feeling the cold seep into me. I hear my voice begging him to let me go, but I don't sound like myself. I'm listening to the sobs of another girl.

I'm dragged upward and set on my feet. I claw at my clothing. Then I'm doubled over and my wrist is being folded back, bending, bent as far as it will go and bending still. My nose is near the pavement when the bone begins to bow. I try to regain my balance, to use the strength in my legs to push back, but when my ankle takes weight, it buckles. I scream. Heads turn in our direction. People crane to see what the commotion is. Immediately, I begin to laugh—a wild, hysterical cackle that despite all my efforts still sounds a little like a scream. (194)

One of the things that Westover has told readers throughout her accounts of the abuse is that she has been writing in her journal, but that she always writes *Shawn's* version of events. It is as though his voice has literally taken over her own. On this night, however, something different happens. She begins to question that voice. "*Was it really fun and games?*" I write. *Could he not tell he was hurting me? I don't know. I just don't know*" (195).

At this point, I want to introduce the work of Carol Gilligan who, in her book *Joining the Resistance*, observes the ways in which adolescent girls living under patriarchy are persuaded to dissociate themselves from what they know to be true, and nowhere is this dissociation more evident than in their frequent use of the phrase, "I don't know." Gilligan writes,

As I began to question what girls seemed not to know, given what they had known previously, I came to a new understanding. In the phrase "I don't know," the word "don't" jumped out as an injunction

standing between “I” and “know.” Whose word was that? Parents? Teachers? Preachers? Or something in the air that girls pick up? Wherever it came from, it resided inside, becoming an inner voice mandating dissociation: don’t say this, don’t think this, don’t feel this. In short, don’t know what you know; ignore the promptings of your body and your emotions. Listen instead to the voices that tell you what is happening and what you should feel and think and say. Don’t listen to yourself. (63-4)

In this scene in *Educated*, we can clearly see Westover beginning to come to terms with what has been, for so long, a clear dissociation between her actual experience and what Shawn and even her parents have told her is true about her experience. It’s on this night that Westover decides to actually write, for herself, what happened. This work doesn’t happen all at once, for her version exists alongside Shawn’s version, but she has taken a step toward claiming for herself her own perspective, toward erasing the *don’t* between the “I” and the “know.” Westover writes, “Not knowing for certain, but refusing to give way to those who claim certainty, was a privilege I had never allowed myself. My life was narrated for me by others. Their voices were forceful, emphatic, absolute. It had never occurred to me that my voice might be as strong as theirs” (197).

This newly found voice would prove most important when confronting her parents about Shawn’s abuse years later, home again in Iowa, this time from graduate school at Cambridge. Her father, confronted with Westover’s version of events, of the truth of the abuse she had been living with for years, asks his daughter for proof. “What the hell am I supposed to think if you ain’t got proof?” (285). That night, Shawn threatens Westover with a knife with both parents in the room and then goes to his own home and kills his own dog. Their father then tries to persuade the rest of the family to accept that none of this happened, that Westover herself is possessed by the devil and that is why she is making such stories up. Westover’s sister Audrey (a pseudonym) writes her a letter telling her that she has accepted their father’s explanation: Audrey wrote “that I had betrayed her because I’d given myself over to fear, the realm of Satan, rather than walking in faith with God. I was dangerous, she said, because I was controlled by that fear, and the Father of Fear, Lucifer” (293).

Now, Westover was the one the family was persuaded to fear. Not Shawn. Not the abuser. The one who was abused. Though her mother had seemed to make some concessions earlier and had gone so far as to say that she should have protected her better (272), she, too, joins with her husband and decides that Westover herself is the child to be feared, the child who has turned her back on her faith and on God.

Her parents make one last attempt to save her from herself, from this reality she insists on believing in. Gene and Faye (pseudonyms) travel to Harvard and offer Westover a priesthood blessing. “This was the moment: if I accepted the blessing, he could cleanse me. He would lay his hands on my head and cast out the evil thing that

had made me say what I had said, that had made me unwelcome in my own family. All I had to do was yield, and in five minutes, it would be over” (302). She refuses to accept her mother and father’s version of what happened—that is, that the abuse never happened—and instead chooses for herself what she characterizes as this privilege: “to see and experience more truths than those given to me by my father, and to use those truths to construct my own mind” (304). She refuses the blessing, and she loses her family.

The book flap description on the hardcover of Tara Westover’s *Educated: A Memoir* tells readers that “Tara Westover was seventeen the first time she set foot in a classroom,” and this is the point that we see taken up again and again in reviews of the book. The most frequently cited incident in the reviews, by far, is the moment when Westover raises her hand in one of her first college classes to ask her professor what the word *Holocaust* means.

The print version of the NPR story makes no mention of the abuse and characterizes Westover in its headline as a “Memoirist [who] Retraces Her Journey from Survivalist Childhood to Cambridge Ph.D” (Davies). The *New York Times* headline reads: “She Didn’t Own a Birth Certificate or Go to School. Yet She Went On to Earn a Ph.D.” In that review, Alec MacGillis characterizes *Educated* as a tale of escape from an extreme upbringing, mentioning Shawn’s abuse only in this way: “As if her father’s tyranny is not enough, she must contend with sadistic physical abuse from a different brother, whose instability was worsened by a 12-foot plunge onto rebar in yet another Westover workplace accident.” Here is an opportunity to remark not on an urban-rural divide in America but instead on the most pervasive and underreported form of abuse in this country. Instead, the review turns back to Tara’s quest for an education. A shorter, “Inside the List” review in the *New York Times* characterizes the abuse as the reason Westover wanted to leave the mountain and notes that Westover is estranged from her parents, “who turned a blind eye to her brother’s beatings” (Jordan). There is recognition, here, of cause and effect, but there is no further commentary on the scourge that is sibling abuse.

Curiously, a review in *The Atlantic* begins by noting that “Tara Westover’s one-of-a-kind memoir is about the shaping of a mind, yet page after page describes the maiming of bodies—not just hers, but the heads, limbs, and torsos of her parents and six siblings, too” (Hulbert), yet it contains no mention of Shawn’s abuse or its effects on Westover’s current life. *The Guardian*’s interview with Westover, however, *does* address the abuse by asking outright this question: “As you grew older Shawn began to bully and abuse you. He pulled you around by your hair, broke your wrist, flushed your head in the toilet, killed the family dog and threatened to kill you, too. How did this begin?” The interviewer then asks two important follow-up questions: “How could your parents have turned a blind eye to what was going on” and “Was that what finally led to the rift between you and your family?” The answer, of course, is yes. Westover responds, “What broke us was not me going to college against my father’s will or even leaving home to go to Cambridge. It was me speaking openly

about my brother Shawn being violent and abusive to me. My parents couldn't deal with that so they turned the other way and made me look like the bad person."

And finally, the article that deals most openly and most thoroughly with the issue of sibling abuse is not an American publication at all but an *Irish Times* piece titled for one of Westover's remarks, "You Could Miss Someone Every Day and Still Be Glad They're Not in Your Life." Catherine Conroy writes, "In the midst of this already difficult childhood, there was more personal violence. Westover was being openly terrorized by her volatile physically abusive brother Shawn. Ultimately, it would be the desire to have her family acknowledge and confront this abuse that would turn them against her for good." Conroy gives space in the article to Westover's reflections on her family's refusal to hear her truth. Westover says,

'I actually believed that I was crazy. I have a theory that all abuse, no matter what kind of abuse it is, is foremost an assault on the mind. I think if you're going to abuse someone you really have to convince them of two things. First you have to normalize what you're doing, convince them that it's not that bad. And the second thing is to convince them that they deserve it in some way.

'[My parents] succeeded in making me not trust myself in any meaningful way. It's very difficult to continue to believe in yourself and that you're a good person when the people who know you best don't.'

Conroy addresses with Westover, too, the lingering effects of abuse, especially of "being forced to think of herself as 'a whore.'" Westover says, "You have to confront the belief and where it comes from. You have to understand intellectually why it's wrong and you have to convince yourself with as much repetition and effort as it took to convince you into that place of worthlessness." We hear echoes here of Barton's remark at the end of *Dog Medicine* that it is a lifelong process for her to work through the effects of her brother's abuse. The effects of sibling abuse linger long after the physical wounds heal.

### The Stories that Get Our Attention

In *Letting Stories Breathe*, Arthur W. Frank writes that "stories' primary or primal work is to provide people with a guidance system that directs attention within what William James famously called the 'blooming, buzzing confusion' of the world that humans are cast into. People need terms of *selection*—what to pay attention to—and following immediately is the need for *evaluation*, or what to think about what has been selected" (46). Stories direct our attention. They direct our attention to what matters, to who matters, to the issues that matter, and the stories that are *not told* accomplish this same work in that our attention does not go there. Obviously, I am not making the case that these vivid stories of sibling abuse have not been told. But what I want to direct our attention to, the story I want to think through, is the one told by blurbs and reviews of two memoirs by women who were abused by siblings.

Not by parents. Not by strangers. By *siblings*. This is a very specific kind of abuse, one that does not get enough mention to even be stigmatized.

Stories of depression still carry a stigma. Stories of being uneducated most certainly carry a stigma. It makes sense, then, that *Dog Medicine* and *Educated* would be lauded for challenging these stigmas. But these memoirs tell more than one story. The depression Julie Barton suffers from, the depression that nearly kills her, is arguably the *direct result* of sibling abuse, as she indicates herself. Tara Westover's estrangement from her family is not the result of her decision to escape her upbringing and get a Ph.D. It is, instead, the result of her parents' refusal to acknowledge the abuse that happened under their roof. As Westover tells Catherine Conroy of the *Irish Times*, "the kinds of psychological manipulations and reality distortions that my parents had to put themselves, me, my siblings through in order to justify my brother, I think that was much worse [than Shawn's abuse]." At the center of both of these memoirs is sibling abuse.

In the epigraph I chose for this essay, Dorothy Allison remarks on the trauma of not seeing ourselves in the literature we read. Given that sibling abuse is the most common form of domestic violence, that children are the most violent members of American families, that the effects of sibling abuse are lifelong, untold numbers of readers who pick up Barton's or Westover's memoirs will see some aspect of their experiences mirrored back to them. Most of the reviews won't prepare them for this experience, however. They'll be prepared for narratives of depression and of education, of dog love and of rural survivalism. What they'll find is the truth about sibling abuse. Leigh Gilmore asks, about the #MeToo movement, "I wonder how much truth we will allow ourselves to hear" (4), and I cannot help but ask the same question, now, about sibling abuse.

#### Coda

At least one reviewer has noted that my tone in this piece is academic though slightly accusatory and I want to say something about that here. Readers will not be surprised to learn that I was a victim of sibling abuse growing up, that I did not see my experience reflected back to me in the work I read or in the movies or television shows I watched, that I began to believe what those around me wanted me to believe: that what I had experienced hadn't actually happened, that it was just sibling rivalry, or that it couldn't *really* have been as severe as I remembered it being. Thus, when I read memoirs like Barton's and Westover's that reflect so much of my experience back to me, I am encouraged and heartened. But when I read and hear what they are "about," and those descriptions in the public discourse pass over the opportunity to take up the most common form of domestic violence, I am disheartened and, yes, angry. I don't flatter myself by believing that this piece will change the conversation about these two books; I want instead to be on the record and to speak for those who have experienced sibling abuse. I see you. I hear you. So, too, do Barton and Westover.

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