

NO STYLE but STRENGTH

by Maddie Norris

“See No Evil” by Television¹

I haven't forgotten.² On the TV, camera crews show footage outside a tour bus with closed captioning.³ The bus is blurred but looks to have sprawling graffiti along its side. The camera doesn't move; the voices are presumed hidden inside the bus. The words appear one at a time. “I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet.”⁴ You can hear and read the words. But, my language obfuscates: what I mean is that *I* hear and read the words.⁵ I sit in my bed, picking at the cuffs on my oversized flannel, a shirt that hides my body, hangs like a sheet from my shoulders. There's a tear near one of the shoulders that I don't remember getting. Maybe it happened one night when I was drunk. “You can do anything...Grab em by the pussy. You can do anything.”⁶ *He* could do anything, but I couldn't.⁷ I sat there and heard it and read it and took it. “They let you do it.”

¹ Though one of the most influential bands in punk music, their albums were generally ignored by the mainstream market when first released.

² Television sings, “What I want, I want now, and it's a whole lot more than ‘anyhow.’”

³ I've seen this scene so many times it feels redundant to recap, but once the reel starts, I can't stop it. The only thing I can do is disrupt it, talk back.

⁴ “You're so sharp, getting good reactions with your evil talk.”

⁵ “I understand all destructive urges.”

⁶ My female friends are sick of hearing this story, and I am, too, but the scene, the voice continues to haunt me.

⁷ One in six women has experienced sexual assault.

“A Little Less Sixteen Candles, A Little More ‘Touch Me’” by Fall Out Boy

My first favorite band was Fall Out Boy, who moved from punk to emo to pop, cutting their hair and dying it black and then keeping it clean-cut. I used to talk about their songs with my first real crush. Firsts seemed important to me at the time, in middle school and high school, but the beginnings are tumbling away from me: I no longer find them interesting. Still, they are what I reach for; the beginnings are clear, distinct, a single note strummed. The endings are harder, a distortion pedal pushed, fingers struck down, sound squalling towards every smooth surface. I don't talk to Patrick anymore; I think he lives in Michigan, or Minnesota, or some state covered in snow. Maybe Wisconsin. He lives far away, now. He was a vocal atheist at an Episcopalian school and had strong neck muscles and drove a stick shift. He liked their *Folie à Deux* album,⁸ which was smoother and less noisy than their initial ones; their late work felt like a vigorous, soft head massage; their early work felt like slamming your skull against a brick wall. I told him as much when we were sitting on a fresh cedar bench by a pond. “I like the rawness of their earlier work,” I said.⁹ He smushed ants between his fingers and said, “I'm saving you from all these ants.” They weren't bothering me, but the task kept him near, so I let him kill them with his hands.¹⁰

⁸ Which translates to “madness of two,” which means shared psychosis, which means what happens to one happens to many.

⁹ I was pretentious. It was around this time that I read *Lolita*, and it became my favorite book throughout high school. I can still recite the last lines. “And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my *Lolita*.”

¹⁰ In this music video, the bassist is a vampire, walking the streets at night, protecting women from men with his super human strength and sharp teeth.

“Judy is a Punk” by The Ramones

Speaking of beginnings, punk has two. One in America and one in Britain. One based in music and fashion, one expanded to politics and culture. Television and the Ramones populated New York in 73, 74 with their leather motorcycle jackets and long hair and bangs, and so maybe it started with the art, with the noise and electric guitars, with the song “Judy is a punk.”¹¹ But then ask Joey Ramone and he’ll tell you they didn’t start the punk scene: they only jumpstarted it: “When we left England [after the tour], the whole British punk scene kicked off...[but we didn’t start it] because we didn’t stab ourselves and shit on stage and poke out our eyelids with safety pins. We didn’t strangle each other on stage and mutilate each other with bats and stuff like that.”¹² So maybe punk didn’t start until it grounded in the UK, where unemployment and anger were convergently high, where punk became a subculture of aggression and internal violence turned visible. Maybe it didn’t start until the music prompted action, prompted movement. Until they didn’t just listen and take it.¹³

¹¹ The word “punk” dates back to Shakespeare’s time and means prostitute i.e. from *Measure for Measure*: “My lord, she may be a punk; for many of them are/ neither maid, widow, nor wife.”

¹² And yet they sang, “Jackie is a punk, Judy is a runt. They both went to Berlin, joined the Ice Capades, and oh, I don’t know why. Oh, I don’t know why. Perhaps they’ll die.”

¹³ Much of punk relies on throwing the body into the music, into the story the song tells. It relies on bloody fingers and strained vocals, but punk is more than that. It transcends the body, it uses the pain of making noise to reach a separate space, a higher octave, a louder decibel.

“It’s the End of the World as We Know It” by R.E.M.

At least twenty-one women have accused Donald Trump of sexual harassment.^{14 15 16 17 18 19 20}

¹⁴ Ivana Trump, when they were married.

¹⁵ Jill Harth, at an Oak Table dinner, under the table.

¹⁶ Temple Taggart McDowell, on the lips.

¹⁷ “Jane Doe,” raped, at a party, when she was 13.

¹⁸ Cassandra Searles, at a pageant, where he grabbed her ass.

¹⁹ Tasha Dixon, at a pageant, in a changing room, half-naked. A Trump spokesperson says, “These accusations...have already been disproven by many individuals who were present.”

²⁰ Mariah Billado, at a pageant, in a changing room, half-naked.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34

21 Jennifer Murphy, on the lips. She still voted for him.

22 Natasha Stoyneff, on the lips, against a wall, while she was interviewing him. Trump responded to the allegation by saying, "Look at her... I don't think so." He was still elected.

23 Mindy McGuillivray, on his estate, where he grabbed her ass. Is the whole US his estate now?

24 Rachel Crooks, on the lips. She says, "I was so upset that he thought I was so insignificant that he could do that."

25 Jessica Leeds, on an airplane, under her shirt and up her skirt. She says, "He was like an octopus: his hands were everywhere."

26 Lisa Boyne, at a dinner.

27 Samantha Holvey, at a pageant.

28 Kristin Anderson, under her skirt.

29 Summer Zervos, on the mouth, under her shirt, all over her body. She spoke out, saying "I want to be able to sleep when I'm 70."

30 Cathy Heller.

31 Karena Virginia.

32 Jessica Drake.

33 Ninni Laaksonen.

34 Bridget Sullivan.

“God Save the Queen” by The Sex Pistols³⁵

During the silver jubilee, the 25th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II’s ascension to the throne, the Thames was flooded with noise. The Sex Pistols rented a river boat, crisscrossed strings of pendant union jacks from its rafters, and loaded boxed speakers on deck. For hours, the media mingled on board, taking photos and videos and drinking beer from glinting pint glasses and cans collecting condensation. Johnny Rotten wore his signature red hair spiked, a white blazer a little too big in the shoulders, and black leather pants. As the boat passed in front of Parliament, they sound-checked, heard the guitar screech, the bass screech, the vocals screech and fixed nothing. The water shook with sound. They played “Anarchy in the UK.” Then “God Save the Queen”³⁶ and then two more songs before police boats circled and cut the power. Jon Savage, the well-known music journalist was on the boat, and said, “It’s like they’ve been uncaged – the frustration in not being able to play bursts into total energy and attack. Rotten’s so close all you can see is a snarling mouth and wild eyes, framed by red spikes.”³⁷

³⁵ Sid Vicious, the bassist for The Sex Pistols, stabbed his girlfriend Nancy to death. He tried to kill himself twice in the next few weeks, claiming, “I want to be with my Nancy.”

³⁶ Imagine strolling along the opaque river with a loved one, or a potential loved one, or one you know you don’t love but still like and imagine hearing yells of “God save the Queen, she’ ain’t no human being.”

³⁷ The gender is wrong, but when I hear this description, I picture the furies, the Greek goddesses who wore snakes as accessories, who tortured men for transgressions against the natural order. In particular, I picture the fury Allecto, whose name means “unceasing in anger.”

“Born Under Punches (The Heat Goes On)” by The Talking Heads

At some point, the silence is too much. You’ve got to make some noise. And by you, of course, I mean me, too.³⁸ I was 20 and a sophomore in college. I took swigs from a vodka bottle before going to one, two, three bars. I’ve tried to remember the details. The cold February night, the way the sidewalk looked blue under streetlamps, the bar warm with bodies, the wooden tables, the shots, a tongue, down my throat, a hand, in my waistband.³⁹ The bed, the spinning ceiling fan, cutting at the air, and the thought, “You need to remember this. Remember this. Remember this.”⁴⁰ And so there are two beginnings: when it happened and when I said something, but the beginnings aren’t of interest to me. The noise, the music, the ear-drum-pounding voices are what interest me.⁴¹

³⁸ I don’t mean it’s on the victims to speak up. I only mean that I didn’t say anything for two years, and at some point, I got tired of it.

³⁹ “Take a look at these hands. The hand speaks, the hand of a government man. Well, I’m a tumbler, born under the punches.”

⁴⁰ In my memory, I hover above, watch myself from a space outside the body, a peripheral place of escape.

⁴¹ What interests me is when footnotes stop being addendums, sidebars, and digressions. When do footnotes stop being ancillary and become primary?

“Chicago Seemed Tired Last Night” by The Hold Steady⁴²

On the news, it seems like every day, there’s a new accuser and a new man I must scratch from my life with the sharpened end of a safety pin. ~~Matt Lauer Harvey Weinstein Woody Allen Louis C.K. Mario Batali Garrison Keillor Russel Simmons Jeffrey Tambor Al Franken Steven Seagal Ed Westwick Dustin Hoffman George H.W. Bush~~⁴³ Often I want to let out an exhausted sigh: “Another one?” I trusted many of these men.⁴⁴ I watched them in my pajamas on the news before I went to school while eating a piece of toast and sipping sugary coffee. As the years went on, I’d watch them before school while slurping yogurt and black coffee. Then, even later, I’d watch them before work while drinking just coffee. After a bad date, I’d pour a glass of wine for myself, cocoon in my bed, pull up their TV show on Netflix, and laugh with abandon. In big cities, I’d visit spots where the men filmed and pretend to be in front of the camera, in front of their gaze. I went to their restaurants and listened to their music and watched their films, rapt. I’m still rapt, enthralled, riveted, gripped, but not by them, not anymore. I’m rapt, these days, by the wave of women making noise, screeching in the streets, “I am a human being.”⁴⁵

⁴² A former lover introduced me to this band. The band stuck; he didn’t.

⁴³ To name a few.

⁴⁴ Didn’t we all?

⁴⁵ Terrence wrote, “*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto,*” which translates to, “I am human, nothing human is alien to me.” How funny, I think, that a man said this.

“Adventures Close to Home” by The Raincoats

The Raincoats were a pioneer feminist punk band.⁴⁶ Or, rather, the first feminist *post-punk* band, because though inspired by punk and rock, being female added a new chapter to music history.⁴⁷ The band wanted to build, rather than tear down; they wanted empathy over anger, but of course, they, too, wanted to be heard. The founding members grew up in Portugal and Spain in the 70s, during political upheaval and reinforcement of restrictive regimes.⁴⁸ They formed in London in 1977, where the bassist lived in an unkempt flat that sprouted mushrooms in odd corners.⁴⁹ The members coalesced through watching shows in town and found their final member, a violinist, through an ad that read “Female musician wanted. No style but strength.” None of the musicians were classically trained or talented, but punk music is less about the craft and more about the emotion, the noise, the feeling. In a live recording of them from their early days, they sheath their bodies in red and floral dresses, pick furiously at the guitar strings, nail the symbol, fit the violin against the neck, and they all look directly at the audience. The lead singer’s brown bangs separate at her eyes and she bares her teeth as she sings.

⁴⁶ As anti-establishment as punk music is, its history is incredibly straight, white, and male.

⁴⁷ How do we know when we’ve overbrimmed a category? How do we know when a word is no longer the right container for the truth? And how do we make space for the truth that won’t fit nicely into those premade boxes?

⁴⁸ They were silenced by their governments, so they found a new outlet, a new platform: punk.

⁴⁹ A year after I was raped, I lived in an apartment next to a concert venue, and my ceiling and wardrobe grew dots, then continents, of mold. I’d scrub furiously at the mold, only to have it reappear in new places. Still, I kept scrubbing.

“Rebel Girl” by Bikini Kill⁵⁰

“You have good taste in music,” they say.⁵¹ They mean it as a compliment, but they sound surprised. “Thank you,” I say.⁵² “I like your smile,” they say. “I like your mind,” they say. “I like your sweater,” they say, and then they trace the letters on it, spilling words onto my body with their fingers. They send me songs and albums and playlists, but most of what they send is just racket. I prefer the songs my friends send. We curate a list, condensing it into a playlist, fiddling with the order, fiddling with the title, fiddling with the experience until it feels right, until it’s curated perfectly for us, until we pile into a car and roll the windows down and turn the stereo up and drive into the Sonoran Desert and wind past the saguaros and ocotillos and other prickly things and then we find ourselves screaming and somewhere else. I remember the first time I heard Bikini Kill. I was in the car with two friends, driving to two-dollar tacos. It was nighttime, and the car moved us from light to dark to light as we passed under streetlamps. “How does it feel?” the singer screamed, “It feels blind!”

⁵⁰ The band, composed of four women, was one of the first of the riot grrrl movement. The lead singer, Kathleen Hanna, would ask women to come to the front of the stage at concerts, and she’d hand them lyric pamphlets. The band wanted a chorus of fiery women, and they got it. If there was a male heckler, Hanna would dive off the stage to confront him.

⁵¹ It’s become a game to see how long it takes for men to say this to me.

⁵² I want to say, “Better than you.” Next time, I will.

“Modern Girl” by Sleater-Kinney

Stormy Daniels says she isn't a victim. She met Trump several years ago at a hotel. She blames herself for going to his room alone. Trump was married with a newborn. She didn't find him physically attractive, she didn't want to have sex with him, but she did. Trump suggested he could get her on to his television show.⁵³ He told her she was smart and beautiful. She says she isn't a victim, but how many of us identify with that term?⁵⁴ It's a noun that denotes a powerless person, a word that holds us in the lock of powerlessness. “I never said I was a victim,” she says. A man threatened to cause her bodily harm in front of her daughter. “That's a beautiful little girl,” he said. “It'd be a shame if something happened to her mom.” He told her, “Leave Trump alone.” He told her, “Forget the story.”⁵⁵ She was forced to sign a nondisclosure agreement. “We can make your life hell in many ways,” another man told her. She's been sent a cease-and-desist order. She's been publically maligned by the most politically powerful man in the United States, but still she speaks.⁵⁶ She went on 60 minutes to tell her story. Perhaps, for a moment, she felt powerless, alone and incapable, but perhaps a voice strengthens the body, perhaps the story a body holds is more powerful than the damage done to it.

⁵³ It's a promise he's made to a lot of women to get them to his room alone.

⁵⁴ A word cannot contain us.

⁵⁵ Which means, of course, forget your story. Stop singing out.

⁵⁶ “Anger makes me a modern girl. Took my money: I couldn't buy nothing. I'm sick of this Brave New World.”

“Sister” by White Lung⁵⁷

The video opens to a red screen, corners rounded off, like on an old TV. Two black silhouettes, hair crimped and teased to maximum volume. The two women enter from opposite corners and place their backs to each other in the center of the red. They turn towards the camera and strike a pose, one hand behind each head, elbows pointing sharply off-screen. Next scene: a man drinking amber liquid from a wine glass. He wears a black turtleneck, blue light swimming behind him. He opens a phone book and traces his finger to an image of the two women and the words “Sister” and “Call now for a wild chat” above a phone number. Cut back to the two women, one on the phone who begins to sing, “You’ll burn a bit.” The video is from White Lung’s most recent album, *Paradise*. In it, the band moves away from startling noise distorted by poor equipment and towards streamlined storylines and lyrics.⁵⁸ Several of the songs detail couples who kidnapped and killed women.⁵⁹ The songs are written from the perspective of the female killer, and the lead singer, Mish Barber-Way, says of playing the new work, “I conjure up a new kind of anger.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ According to *Rolling Stone* magazine, the band sounds like, “Punk rock battling the patriarchy while doling out melody under the table.”

⁵⁸ Punk isn’t one-note anger.

⁵⁹ Every day, I struggle with what it means to be both predator and prey, to be both strong and weak.

⁶⁰ A friend tells me, “I used to think I wasn’t angry, but then I turned twenty-three and started screaming into pillows to release the tension in the back of my neck.” I celebrated my twenty-third birthday late last year.

“Dream No 9” by Big Joanie

I sometimes dream that it’s happening again. I wake, in the middle of the night, slicked with sweat, and feel around for my edges. One cold foot is toeing the edge of the bed, the other is curled under my knee. One hand is above my pillow and one hidden below. I wake up and stop dreaming. Or I wake in the middle of the night and see a man undressing beside my bed. He is blue from the lamplight outside. I see his silhouette, his jeans slipping to his ankles, his feet stepping out of his pants and towards my bed. I see him and know that I am hallucinating. I focus on my breathing and wait for my eyes to recalibrate what is happening. What is happening is I am in bed, alone, remembering. What is happening is I am waking up and washing my face. What is happening is I am making coffee, feeling the hot liquid swirl down my throat, tasting the dark flavor coat my tongue. What is happening is I am walking to campus in my dirty Chuck Taylors, walking to my job, to my classes, passing prickly pear cacti and men sitting on their front porch steps and I’m listening to the playlist my friends have made while the sun begins to warm my side of the earth, listening to Bikini Kill and Le Tigre, listening to the guitars swell in my ears and the voices straining against the smallest bones in my body, imagining the tiny hammers in my ear pounding out their story against my eardrum.