

## Violent Fragments\*

Dan Öberg\*\*

‘Dying is nothing, you have to know how to disappear.’<sup>1</sup>

### I.

Junior high school was always violent. But this fight was different. There was no struggle. It was as if the unfolding of events had been scripted in advance. The younger boy was droopy-faced and ugly. His eyes looked haunted. The older boy grabbed his t-shirt. ‘You understand why I have to do this,’ he asked, almost politely. ‘I understand’ the young boy whispered. The hallway was quiet, as it mostly was during class. I watched in silence along with the others as the older boy began in a systematic fashion to punish the younger boy. Grabbing and hitting his arm against a metal radiator in the stairway. Cautiously at first, as if surprised by the lack of resistance. Flesh and bone met metal creating a hollow rhythm. The young boy didn’t resist but his droopy face squirmed in pain. And gradually the restraints disappeared.

The older boy hit the arm towards the edge of the radiator until it broke. An adult face, a teacher, probably alarmed by the sound, looked out from one of the classrooms, saw the scene, decided today was not the day, and closed the door while looking away. Soundless screams of pain, a muffled echo of bones breaking, there was blood, and in the midst of it a twisted broken arm. I have come to realize that the sound of breaking bones varies a lot. At times they snap quietly, at times they crack like twigs, at times they break like a thunderclap - when they broke my ribs that first winter, for walking funny (like they needed a reason), I didn’t hear any sound at all.

The younger boy got up, ran; fell down the stairs hugging the broken arm with his other arm. We on the other hand, hugging the older boy, touching him, calming him. Did he smile? Did he cry? I don’t remember. Maybe it doesn’t matter? It was done. I only saw the young boy once after that. When he and his parents moved their furniture out of their apartment into a waiting trailer. The parents’ eyes mirroring that of the young boy’s, haunted. The boy’s arm in a plaster. This was not the first arm that was broken in my junior high school. We traded eyes for eyes, teeth for teeth, carelessly playing with pain, as if broken bones somehow mended broken lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories* (London: Verso, 1990), 14.

## II.

Looking back, the scientist in me gets the urge to name the violence of the past: to detach it from the subconscious, to give it meaning. Can such naming amount to anything else than a ‘ghetto’ cliché? A type of violence that has been evoked millions of times before, by people who had it much worse than us? Most of the violence was banal, predictable, mundane, perhaps forgivable. Some was unspeakable, not forgivable – unforgettable. The alienating violence of the grey useless housing projects. The swirl of alcohol and gasoline fumes. The pathetic mental ward in the midst of it.<sup>2</sup> And, as a kicker, the physical violence. Watching your friends, twice the size, humiliate someone; watching the police, a hundred times as strong, humiliate your friends. Whatever was done to us we made sure we were also doing it to ourselves and to one another.

We were “Social Group C” according to the clinical, administrative Swedish parlance. “Social group C” as in not upper class (“A”), not quite middle class (“B”), but as in the class one leaves when “going places”. The word is seldom used anymore. To a Sweden that sells social- and gender equality to the world its evocation most likely undermines the brand. This said, it is not like we lived in *The Wire* or in a warzone, far from it. The narrative of the ghetto, or of ever-present violence, gives my past an enchanted aura that feels fake. But despite its fakeness, it is an aura that stands in for a past that stubbornly insists on being silent. It is all I have. When I recollect and write this past into existence it is as if the aura is there, waiting for the flickering cursor on the screen, insidiously tempting my fingers to retrace hip-hop rhymes and strum out fragmented soldier stories. Why is my past so silent? And why does it seem as if I lose my voice when trying to challenge the way it constantly lingers on the borders between anger, indifference, and shame?

I was brought up surrounded by love but also surrounded by silence, steeped in a culture of silence that claimed that ‘children should be spared’ from knowing. So I endure in this silence. Perhaps a bit embarrassed that I have never seen ‘real war’ – only the white trash version. Both my grandfathers fought against the Soviet Union and lost the biggest war the world has ever seen. My grandmother lost one eye in a bombing raid and still managed to give birth to four children after the age of 40, one of which was my mother. She grew up in a war torn country. My father, a coastal ranger, UN soldier, got shot through the chest before I was born. I grew up looking at the scar next to his breastbone. War and violence touches you. One inch to the left and he would have died. My whole life indebted to them, to that inch. What endures in me of their wars? Of their silences and scars? What endures through generations?<sup>3</sup>

## III.

It was in-between classes. The hallway was not quiet that day. Two policemen, at least twice my size, they picked me up at school. In front of what felt like the whole world, we drove off.

<sup>2</sup> It never occurred to me at the time that there are structural, economic reasons for why the authorities would want to place a ward in the middle of a housing project, nor the violence of doing so, making the rest of *us* feel all the more sane, all the more normal the moment *they* arrived.

<sup>3</sup> My grandparents are dead. I have spent years collecting war stories and conducting interviews with Japanese World War II veterans and South African soldiers from the Border wars as material for books and articles. I have read diaries, letters, reports from witness seminars, and listened to discussions amongst soldiers of their war experiences countless times. But I have no knowledge whatsoever of what my grandparents felt when at war. No idea why my grandfather volunteered to fight in the Second World War. Or how my grandmother felt after losing her eye. Or even what it was like to be a parent during times of war. This was never discussed. Now, time has run out, and for better and for worse I am beyond the end of those questions.

They were cool, as relaxed as I was scared. They drove off telling me ‘we need to talk’, ‘you will want to talk to us first’. I almost pissed myself in the police car. I followed, knowing nothing of no little girl, or of needing to talk, but “knowing” fully well what happens to a minor who does not obey the police. Face dragged in the asphalt, scraped cheeks with sand and blood pouring out of your mouth, out of your forehead, pitiful screams muffled by the weight of the man on top of you.

And I talked. I spewed words like there was no tomorrow. A violent explosive diarrhea of tear-filled words, as if I could hold nothing back. Exposing everything, confessing to anything, anything but *that*. Until they smiled at what was in front of them. Later, out of love, out of fear, came the four-word question, lingering ever after like a disenchanting echo - ‘did you do it?’ During the interrogation the police asked me the same question, almost out of habit, before eventually letting me go. As I walked out of the police station I lit a cigarette. Inhaled. Exhaled. The world was exactly the same as before. My world was not.

It is as if I died there. A little. On that day. I died.

And life continued. I died, but I was still there,

Do we really tell stories to reveal ourselves, our scars?

Or do we tell them, hoping to disappear?

What endures in me of my silences and scars? What will I pass on?

#### IV.

Every day in the story of life, my daughter comes home from kindergarten. She kicks off her shoes and bursts into this song from the Disney film *Frozen*. And it is like her careless, out of tune voice sings a goodbye to the past: to all the memories, all the traumas, to all the clichés. I can’t sing it like my daughter can. She gives voice to the silence I cannot fill, that my parents and their parents could not fill. Can I disappear in her singing? A child’s voice amidst the scars of the past echoes in the bones, once broken, mended, never properly healed, forgotten, or remembered.

Stubbornly it insists:

‘Let it go, let it go, can’t hold it back anymore,  
Let it go, let it go, turn your back and slam the door’.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This is a paraphrase of the lyrics from the song ‘Let It Go’ from the motion picture *Frozen* (Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2013).