



Ecriture Feminine.

Kate Simpson

‘Besides, you've written a little, but in secret. And it wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way, or because you wrote, irresistibly, as when we would masturbate in secret, not to go further, but to attenuate the tension a bit, just enough to take the edge off. And then as soon as we come, we go and make ourselves feel guilty-so as to be forgiven; or to forget, to bury it until the next time.’

— Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*

The summer it happened, it started with this. I remember it making sense to me. Alex showed me it, giggling in the library at school. It came from a chapter in a book that had fallen from the higher shelves. A monochrome sleeve wrapped the contents of *The Newly Born Woman*; a picture of an anonymous woman sat in the top right corner bordered by grey lines. It was dirty; it felt illegal, grown up. Not that we knew what the language was trying to say and if we'd asked each other what it meant, we'd have reached an embarrassed impasse, probably ending in us leaving the library to go talk to the boys outside. But we felt like women reading it, like we had access to the network of fully grown femininity.

We'd been so elated by the words we'd shared in the library that day, I remember feeling that my uniform clung tighter than normal, as though my chest had suddenly grown under the shield of my striped school tie, just by reading about a world of women that I thought I knew about. I wanted to know about it. We revelled in the long, adult words and whispered them to each other under the voice of our teacher. Our electric bodies were charged, sat together in rigid plastic chairs.

We spent days like this, flicking through the pages every free moment we got, sounding out the words to each other, and I felt like we were changing together. After a few days of reading and re-reading the words like a dress rehearsal, Alex bounded into the classroom, smiling stupidly, wearing red lipstick- stolen- head held in contempt of every approaching boy for the rest of the day. I was jealous, and I felt like I'd misunderstood something, and I wanted to know what it was. I waited until we were in the toilets; Alex had been told to take the lipstick off because it wasn't uniform for us. The stiff blue paper towel rubbed the colour off and left the stain of a distorted mouth.

‘Why didn't you let me wear it too?’ Was all I could say.

Alex turned round, eyes glaring. ‘Do we have to do everything together? It was only a joke.’

We didn't talk about what we could or should be in a secretive duo anymore, and by the end of the day Alex was sat next to someone else, talking in that same elated way, like they were just as exciting as those thrilling words. Had it only been a game? I knew our venture into womanhood together had come to a premature end.

Kicking the covers off my hot legs that night, I couldn't sleep. Alex's face came into my mind, with a smile framed by red, never looking more beautiful. The cool air on my ankles made me aware of my shape on the mattress. *Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.* I ran my hand down my thigh thinking of words to describe myself, but I went blank. Why couldn't I think of anything? I wondered if that's what women did; lay in bed knowing who and what they were. Suddenly I felt silly and slammed my legs together straight in the middle of the bed. This is why I wasn't yet a 'newly born woman' because I didn't know myself like they all did. I wasn't a lipstick-wearer, or someone who used the word 'masturbate' carelessly because they knew what it really meant.

I heard them again underneath me, the haunting drone of his voice coming up through the kitchen and through the carpet into my bedroom haven. She never got anything right, how many times had he told her, when would things ever sink in? His words chilled me as I pictured my mother's face jarred by disappointment and a relaxed sense of worthlessness in the muscles of her face; I hid from them under my covers. I remembered when I approaching her one time he'd left her crying at the table. I asked her why she never wore makeup anymore.

'Makeup is for girls who are trying to be something they're not. But Dad knows what my face looks like so there's no need for me to try make something pretty of it.'

I cried for my Mum because she didn't look the same anymore. She was beautiful, but now she was so colourless and exposed. I cried because her face was open and defeated, and because it didn't seem like it was connected to her body anymore.

Later I woke up half dreaming and saw on my bedside table the lipsticks I'd borrowed, I'd snuck into her room when I got back from school, wanting to see what Alex had known before he'd stopped talking to me. I wanted to know why we'd left the boys' toilets separately.

'Boys don't go to toilets together like girls do, James. People will think things.' I hadn't found a time to put them back so she wouldn't notice, but it had been days and she'd said nothing. I turned the lights on, and rubbed the swollen skin round my eyes. The bulbs were failing and dimly lit the Dulux Ivory walls. I'd been told I wasn't allowed to paint it Sweet Pink; my father said I was too young to know what I wanted, and I'd learn it wasn't Pink. Neutral was best. I craved the colour from the lipsticks. Damson, Mulberry, Burgundy. I thought about smearing the walls with them, make them *un-neutral*. The colours existed in that same language of 'woman'; words for red which rolled off the tongue, I whispered them to myself. I kicked the imprisoning covers off and said them again in front of the mirror as I tried on the darkest red she had. I dabbed my lips together, I thought I knew how. I would always watch her roll them onto her lips in the car mirror, raised higher in my booster seat. It felt waxy and heavier than I imagined on my small mouth and the back of my hand. I'd seen her do that in shops. I felt sticky and perfumed and like I could be her.

I remembered the sentence that had made the most sense: *By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her.* I'd asked Alex what confiscated meant and he grabbed my hand, looked me in the eye and said, 'Taken away. Something naughty, something we're not supposed to have.' His lipstick had been confiscated, makeup wasn't allowed for girls let alone boys.

Had words like those been in me the whole time? I could speak for her and we could stand together. I would re-write everything she couldn't say, on my body. It was a body she'd given me, and I would show her what I'd grown up to be because of her. I'd refused to have my hair cut that summer and it was long enough to plait, like I'd seen her do when her hair was longer. They looked like snakes, which would whisper all the secrets she wasn't allowed to tell anyone. I took the idea of the 'Medusa' literally, and laughed at myself maniacally in the mirror, like I could look any boy in the eye and turn them to stone.

Next day I filled my bag with the lipsticks, and one of my Mum's skirts. I didn't tell Alex, but went straight to the toilets. I made sure no one was around and pushed my hand against the icon of the female, locking myself in my own private cubicle. I pulled my shirt up, tied a knot just above the waist line of the skirt. I rolled it round my hips so it was short enough, and unbuttoned the top, exposing my neck and chest. I tied my hair in two separate snakes like I'd practiced so I could do it blind, and grabbed the lipsticks. Fuelled by something I thought I understood, I pressed their colour into my skin, rushing to get the words I'd read onto my bare body. *Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it.* Curling the sticks into words on my stomach I felt filled with something deeply feminine. I thought I could make myself grown up, so I wouldn't have to see my mother's eyes anchored to the floor again, like it was her who had been turned to stone. She had a body to take too. I drew the words I wanted to be my own, and my mother's.

I felt like I understood, and I would write, I could write, my body was *mine*. I regurgitated the words I'd read in angry letters, as if I knew them like sisters. I covered my legs, arms, stomach and chest in Damson, Scarlet, Crimson words:

Woman

We, the repressed

This body is mine

I coated my lips in what was left, puckered them, and left the toilets.

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Alex pretended I didn't exist after that; he'd stopped playing the game and I'd made it real. He laughed with the others when I walked into the classroom, my body exposed and inscribed. They'd got to him and he'd given up before we'd even learnt what the words really meant. They called my parents and while I was walking to the school office they got to me too, led by him, and pushed me into a corner.

'Why did you give up?' I asked Alex, despair smudging the pink on my cheeks. He came towards me and I thought for he was going to kiss me. But he grabbed my collar and whispered in my ear, 'You knew it wasn't real. And I knew what you wanted from the start. You're a dirty little boy who needs to learn.' The red words were replaced by painful flowering circles of blue under the clenched fists of the boys I knew I was no longer like.

We sat as a family under the clinical lights. They stared at the speckled carpet of the office rather than at the words I'd wanted them so badly to see, on, in me. Mum gripped my father's arm, and I felt like I'd lost everything, I thought we were in this together. 'Why?' Was all she said.

My father stopped talking, I felt like I had actually turned him into a statue. He left the month after, and Mum cried. I didn't know whether she cried because I wasn't really a girl, or because she missed him, but I said I was sorry and bought her replacement lipsticks in the same shades. Two weeks later she cried again because her stomach was full with a baby girl and I wished it could have been me, given another go.