

(W)hole (Essay 4: Anonymous)

We waited in a perfumed reception area that was too small to avoid eye contact with the other patients. I looked at the stiff couple a few feet to my left and pegged them “marital discord.” When the door opened and a woman invited us into her office through a smile, I swaggered in with a hard face, but Mom was visibly uptight. We went through introductions, and the counselor asked us to tell her about our “situation.” Once Mom got through her description of my cold stubbornness and stories of our vacillating silent treatments and screaming matches, her voice fizzled out. The counselor thanked her for sharing her perspective. Neither had included me in the conversation.

“Now, would you mind having a seat out in the foyer? I’d like to talk to Katie alone.” It only took Mom three steps to cross the claustrophobic office. She closed the door behind her. I looked down at the heavy Oriental rug covering the entire floor of the office. I searched searching for the edge with the toe of my shoe, but the bloated armchairs pinned the rug down with finality. The counselor looked at me from behind the ~~échauguette~~ of her desk. She locked her eyes on mine, knocking her ammunition into her bow and, aiming. Then she fired.

“Have you ever been sexually abused?”

My shoe halted at the edge of the rug. Before my mind could accept the reality of the attack, my body burned. I was washed in the clammy heat of a sudden pathogen. “Why are you asking me ~~that?~~?”

“It’s okay to tell me. It can help to talk about it.”

I felt heat searing the top of my head. The fire burned down my scalp and behind my ears. I flexed my jaw and ~~made narrow~~ my eyes to slits. “No. I don’t know. Where do you get off?”

“You’re displaying many of the signs of sexual abuse,” she started. “Your fights with your mom show your aggression. Your promiscuity. Your denial. The clothes you’re wearing—how many shirts do you have on?—~~four~~?”

“It’s a cold day! I always wear layers.” As soon as the words cut through the air, I realized my mistake. Her eyes ~~seemed to flash~~ with mild-pleasure at my unintentional admission, but her voice remained distant and unaffected. She had never doubted her eventual victory.

“Being a victim of sexual abuse is a difficult thing to cope with. How about you think about it, then come and see me next week?” She was already pulling out an appointment card. I didn’t wait for her to hand it to me, but stalked to the door and tried to wrest it open. It was heavier than I anticipated. Frustration pulsed with each desperate strain of my heart. I had to lean backward for leverage. In my mind was a wordless screaming, a drowning alarm whose surface I couldn’t break.

Finally, the office door relented, and I swung it open. I could feel my mother’s eyes on me, but I kept going. I pulled open the front door. And kept going. I pulled open the car door and climbed inside. My chest expanded and deflated inside the sheath of my four shirts. I snatched my coat from the backseat and wrapped it around the front of me, pulling it up to my chin. I felt completely naked. My teeth ~~started to were~~ chattering.

* * *

Comment [J1]: Is this detail necessary? It directs the reader’s attention away from the main character right at the beginning when we are trying to learn about who this person is.

Comment [J2]: Specify which door

Comment [J3]: This whole introduction seems very stilted, long-winded, and overly wordy. Maybe try to cut back on unnecessary words and details, make sentences shorter, split sentences apart, etc. Focus more on the main character and her observations, thoughts, and feelings to draw readers in more.

Comment [J4]: Need to establish who the speaker is here. It is impossible for the readers to identify the speaker until after this line of dialogue has ended.

Comment [J5]: This is a great detail, but falls short of its intended purpose because this word is so rarely used. We suggest either defining this word in some way so readers understand the reference or using a synonym that conveys the same idea.

Comment [J6]: The counselor is too sharp in her address of this issue. It feels like there needs to be some kind of lead-in to such a big, intimate question. Also, it might be beneficial to show the counselor more to show how she is helping. However, we do understand that this is a creative nonfiction piece, so if this is how the events happened, then by all means retain this detail.

Comment [J7]: Just above, it was specified that the narrator was unable to find the edge of the rug...

Comment [J8]: When writing passages that include dialogue, a new paragraph indicates a new speaker, so generally it’s better to keep dialogue and actions from the same character together in the same paragraph.

Comment [J9]: This is a great detail, but doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. She couldn’t break the surface of the alarm in her mind? What does that mean? Maybe just explain this a little clearer.

Comment [J10]: The repetition of these phrases isn’t really working for effect. It seems more like an accident. It might be better to reword these.

In calculus, a function is said to be *continuous* if it can be drawn without lifting pen from paper. When graphing values, the plotted points are often connected with an uninterrupted curve to show what the function's values would most likely ~~would~~ have been at the points that ~~weren't~~aren't expressly measured. The continuous curve represents all of the potential points of that function. By connecting those points, it is assumed that the function in question is a continuous function, or one whose outputs vary continuously with the inputs: what you give is what you get. The curve is predictable, reliable. Conventional.

I had been Matt's girlfriend for a year at that point. We were seventeen and wouldn't admit that love could exist with anyone other than each other. I clung to him, needing him, despite knowing it would never work, not wanting it to work, but choosing to be ignorant in order to pretend ~~we-I~~ loved and ~~were-was~~ loved. Our relationship vacillated between desperation and disgust, a convoluted case of needing what hurts. He was my ally, my propaganda, my reason in the war against my parents.

The way I saw it, I didn't have any options; now that this dark secret ~~that I had~~ hidden for almost a decade had been found out by the counselor with such ease, I thought it would hit the fan and fly like shrapnel. Her confrontation made me believe others could see right through me, and that I had come to the point in my life ~~had come~~ when I was-needed to root up my past in order to be rid of it.

Matt and I weren't allowed to see each other, ~~my~~ My parents' assault on our relationship was-came through siege. I remember pacing as I told him over the phone about what had happened with the counselor. I stopped pacing at his response.

"You're *used*. I know I shouldn't think of you that way, but I can't help it. I feel like I've gotten second-hand merchandise."

I was staring out the window overlooking our half-acre pasture. Two horses leaned against each other, heavy and motionless, facing opposite directions, only touching at the neck. Their eyes were fixed on the dirt they stood in. Gray clouds were charging the sky; a storm was coming. My very being ~~seemed-to~~ retracted into some deep recess inside of me. I could feel my arm holding the phone to my ear, but it was like someone else's arm, someone else's ear, someone else's body. I was far away, sucked into the center of this shell ~~that~~ I mentally understood was my body, but was no longer emotionally attached to. One word filled the rest of the newly hollowed caverns in my body, my soul: *used*. It was everywhere around me, repeating and increasing in resonance: Used. Used. Used. Used.

* _ * _ *

My logic told me that if I ~~were-was~~ going to uproot this issue and finally discuss it openly with a counselor, family loyalty should have first dibs. I thought my parents should know what happened in their family before I talked about it with a woman who only knew my first name by checking her notes.

"Mom, is it okay if Matt comes over? We need to talk to you and Dad about something." Surprising me, my mom allowed Matt back into our house for the first time in months. ~~Two days~~

Comment [J11]: This idea is not explained in simple and clear enough language for those not familiar with higher math to understand. However, it is a very nice metaphor that works well with your piece. So, you will want to weigh the benefits of retaining it as it is to keep the characterization of the narrator/the flow of the language, as opposed to simplifying it to reach a wider audience.

Comment [J12]: It also might help to include just one or two sentences to connect this thought back to what the reader has just finished reading to give this statement context and help it relate to the essay as a whole. However, it does also work the way it is as a completely disconnected thought, so it is something you will just want to consider as you revise.

Comment [J13]: This sounds like it needs some kind of transition sentence or two beforehand where Matt is introduced to the readers.

Comment [J14]: The subject of this sentence shifts from "I" to "we." Change to stay consistent.

Comment [J15]: You used this word earlier, and it's too uncommon of a word for it to work twice so close together. It would be best to find a synonym for one or the other.

Comment [J16]: Establish speaker.

~~later~~ I was to appear before the counselor again two days later, so I needed to get this off my chest quickly in order to feel free to “make progress” in the next counseling session.

Matt came over that evening, and we went into the library. I had been trying to remember how old I was when it all happened, ~~and had been~~ using my photo album to help me remember. Matt sat on the carpet next to me, and my mind wandered over old memories as my fingers turned each page.

There. A picture of me at eight years old, standing on the blacktop in front of the house wearing nothing but a faded purple swimsuit. I am smiling in the foreground with my brother a few feet behind me, holding a black kitten to his cheek. I remember this day and many like it. I feel the fire on the soles of my feet from the blacktop. I feel the soft, thin fur of the kittens and their needle-sized rib bones beneath. I feel my eyes squint as I smile for the camera.

I remember that this day, in the shed on the far side of the pasture, we hadn’t been wearing our swimsuits.

My stomach heaved into my throat. ~~o~~oxygen suddenly seemed solid. Matt asked me what was wrong, and all I could do was point to the picture.

“That day.”

My parents opened the door of the library and sat down on the opposite side of the room from where I was huddled on the carpet. Mom’s lips whitened and her crow’s feet deepened as she looked from Matt to me. Dad had run his coarse hand through his hair; so that the white tuft by his left temple was a fluffy, uneven clump.

The room was silent.

I felt myself shrink, hit by a wave of not wanting to be there, say this: ~~the~~ The weight of telling them ~~that~~ their daughter was sexually abused was not as heavy as the weight of telling them their son did the sexual abusing. This would will hurt them, I knew. I couldn’t say a word.

Finally, my mother ~~could not~~ couldn’t wait on my silence any longer. “Well?”

In the end, ~~it~~ it was Matt who said the words *Katie was sexually abused multiple times when she was eight years old*. He told them it was my brother and pushed the picture album still showing the summertime photo toward my parents with three fingers. His voice was whiney and dramatic. He thought he was my hero.

I ~~only~~ cried.

My parents’ faces didn’t change. They asked one question.

“Is this true, Katie?”

I nodded and wouldn’t meet their eyes. My heart screamed *I’m sorry*; *I’m so sorry*, but they didn’t hear.

“We always knew there was something wrong with you.”

They stood up and left the room.

* _ * _ *

In calculus, the purpose of a limit is to discover what a function will do in relation to a certain value, a point that is of particular interest in relation to the function. Calculus provides the unique opportunity to illustrate what functions will do when that certain value doesn’t exist; finding the limits of a function allows for a precise definition of which values can be inputted in order for the function to exist. In order ~~to~~ To find a limit of a function, the value must be approached from both sides. Limits determine exactly where ~~exactly~~ there are points that make the function hold true. Limits also expose holes.

Comment [J17]: This seems strangely contradictory. When she was at the counselor’s office, she showed no indication that she wanted to be there or even try to discuss the issue. Now suddenly, she is looking forward to her counseling appointment and wants to tell her family this secret she’s kept for years. The change in her attitude needs to be led up to more to make it more realistic.

Comment [J18]: How old was he?

Comment [J19]: Use semicolons less frequently for effect, and only when the two phrases connected by the semicolons relate to each other in a significant way where the second describes or explains the first.

Comment [J20]: Since first-person narrative is all technically the narrator’s thoughts, it isn’t necessary to put them in italics or quotations.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Comment [J21]: Be consistent in using or not using contractions in the narrative.

Comment [J22]: Why is this dialogue in italics when all of the other spoken dialogue is in quotations?

Comment [J23]: Again, this mathematical concept is not described simply enough for most to understand the message behind it. As before, it would also help to somehow tie this back into the main body of the essay with one or two explanatory sentences illustrating how this relates to the narrator and their situation. But again, this is just a suggestion.

* * *

Thursday afternoon, precisely a week after I met the counselor for the first time, and I was back in her office. Alone.

"Katie. It's so good to see you again. I'm glad you came back. How are things going with your mother?"

The expression on my face showed her just how stupid I thought her question was. I clenched the paper in my hand a little tighter.

She nodded to the sheet in my hand. "What's that? Did I assign you some homework last time?"

I pushed a single sheet of notebook paper across her desk. The blue ink didn't quite fill a whole page. "You didn't; I did. First of all, I don't even know if it counts as sexual abuse. I thought you'd eventually want me to tell you all ~~of~~ the things that happened, so I wrote them down." I slouched back in the leather chair and waited for her to respond.

She reached across the desk and delicately lifted the paper. As her eyes scanned my words, she pinched the paper with her thumb and forefinger, the rest of her fingers curling away from the page. Her nails were press-ons, the plum shade thick and dark, but shooting for "trendy" and "warm winter tone." I looked at her face. Her skin was soft ~~in~~-with middle-agedness, and her makeup creased in the folds of her skin, exposing them, drawing attention to them; the exact opposite of the purpose of ~~the~~-makeup.

"Well, yes, from a legal standpoint, the experiences you've described here constitute sexual abuse, so have no fear of that."

My eyebrows gathered, lowering over my eyes. "I'm not asking if I can press charges, I'm asking if it even matters." I beckoned to the paper still caught between her two fingers. "I can't even remember everything."

At last, she freed the evidence from her grasp, setting it lightly on the glossed wood top of her desk, then pushing it to its final resting place at her elbow. She leaned toward me ~~over her desk~~, the shoulder pads ~~in~~-of her powder-gray suit jacket slumping forward. "From what you wrote, it sounds like you've harbored this burden for quite some time. How do you feel about your experiences now?"

"I don't think about it."

"Victims are often unaware of the extent ~~of~~ the lasting effects ~~of past~~ sexual abuse ~~from the past~~ can have on their lives. Now that we've established the reality of your abuse, some things in your life since then make a little more sense, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think. I don't think this comes up at all in my daily decisions. I don't think it explains away me and my mom, I don't think it's the reason for me and Matt, and don't even try to tell me it influences what I wear every day."

She leaned back, pushing her palms against the edge of the desk to roll her chair across the plastic floor mat. "I think I have something that will help you." She stood up and walked to a wall of books, pulled one down, and brought it to me. I looked down at the cover. There was a bald man in a suit, grinning helpfully. *Self Matters*.

* * *

Formatted: Indent: First line: 0.5"

“What do you mean you’re not going?”

“I am not going back. How can she call herself a counselor when her idea of counseling is making me read a self-help book?”

“Well, did you read the book?”

“I started to. I couldn’t stomach all the gushy warm-fuzzies about how the first step to improving yourself is believing you have worth. Gag me.”

My mother sighed and, put her hands on her hips. “How are you going to work through your little problem if you won’t go talk with the counselor?”

“She doesn’t want to talk with me, and she doesn’t want to help me work through it. All I want is to be through this. I want to deal with this and be done. And she’s taking her sweet time.” I turned toward the stairs leading to my bedroom, but Mom trailed a few steps behind me.

“I guess you don’t have to go back if you don’t want to. But she suggested I make an appointment to get you a prescription for antidepressants. Your appointment is tomorrow.”

* _ * _ *

Calculus was developed in order to study the motion of objects, their speed and direction. Finding the velocity of a moving object requires the concept of a limit. Limits must be used to understand the potential changes of a function—whether the function is continuous or has a hole. If there is a hole, the function is no longer comfortably formulaic. Approaching the hole from both sides to determine its limits aims to define the bounds of the hole and, identify exactly where exactly the function ceases to be identical to an otherwise continuous function.

* _ * _ *

I left the doctor’s office with a few sample boxes of Lexapro in a brown paper bag. They felt like a shameful secret, stiff-armed at my side. As soon as Mom unlocked the car, I dropped the bag to the floor. My mother climbed into the driver’s seat.

“I don’t know why you had to be so rude to Dr. Hodges, Katie. He was just trying to help.”

“I’m sick of people trying to help. They treat me like a plague. And then throw medications at me like all I need is a pill and then I’ll be normal. Taking a pill to make me happy is a fake—it’s not me. It means everybody everyone wants me to be somebody someone ~~that~~ I’m not.”

As soon as we reached home, I went straight to the bathroom. I pulled each the boxes of pills from the brown paper bag. I opened each box, my fingernails perforating a half-moon into the thin aluminum foil encasing each pill. I laid each pill in a growing pile by the sink, then gathered them up, a mass of powdery white in my cupped hands.

I separated my hands and let the pills pepper the surface of the water in the bowl of the toilet.

* _ * _ *

I pulled my leg up and propped my knee against the steering wheel. It had been well over a year since the counselor, the doctor, the exposure. No one had spoken of those events since. Over time, I began to feel like a thief watching cops catch other thieves, but never getting

Comment [J24]: Establish speaker

Comment [J25]: Establish speaker

Comment [J26]: As before, we suggest that you show how this relates to the essay, if possible.

Comment [J27]: This is very choppy because every sentence is a simple sentence and each one starts with “I” followed by a verb.

Comment [J28]: All of the short, choppy breaks starting at the top of this page sort of make the essay drag. The climax happens when she confronts her parents, but this happens halfway through the essay. It would be much stronger if some of the wrapping up and resolution were shortened by removing some of these short scenes. Most of page 5 is not essential to the main point of the story and could instead be paraphrased in 2-3 sentences without altering or lessening the message/impact of the essay.

caught: safe for now, but wary. And so I was driving to Washington to redefine myself at my first year of college. My mom sat in the passenger seat, staring out at the expanse of asphalt we had yet to cover.

“So, Katie, how are things between you and your brother? You seem to have gotten over your problems.”

The muscles along my jaw and temple tightened. *Caught*. “We’re fine.”

“It’s just that you had such a hard time being around him last year after...your problem.”

“Yeah. It’s fine.” My eyes latched on to each fence post by the freeway, shifting quickly to catch them all.

“Well, you do seem to be doing a lot better now. I’m glad you found a way to work it out.”

My eyes rose from the fence posts to the road sign. Vancouver: 266 miles.

In less than three hundred miles, I would be someone new. People at Clark would see me, put pen to paper, and graph my function. They wouldn’t lift the pen, wouldn’t find the hole. In less than three hundred miles, my mother, my counselor, my doctor, my boyfriend wouldn’t be coming at me from all sides, reaching by limits to the edges of where I cease to be continuous. No one would study my function, relentlessly inputting values in an attempts to get the comfortable answer they would ~~get~~ with a standard function. I wouldn’t be given a pill to fill the hole, the gap, the void, the difference. They wouldn’t even find the hole.

I could be whole.

Two hundred sixty-six miles.

Comment [J29]: All of the other numbers around this one are written out. But because this is what was written on the sign, it might be okay for it to be different. This is something you will want to think about to keep your essay consistent.

Comment [J30]: Your essay would be better if these two sentences were removed. The title of the essay and the inserted sections about math already convey this point, making these sentences redundant.