

On Brothers

A sisterly reflection on fraternal violence

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The Call of the Void

You only talk about men when they've wrecked you romantically in ways that amuse you, a friend of mine sighed. I had to laugh. It was true. I've spent years perfecting the stories I tell about the men I dated and the men I'd love to date. Each story told with a keen comic edge, shrugging off the drama, bending it to my will. Or so I thought. Yet here you find me, straining to muster a smile.

It was something I excelled at: laying myself bare while revealing little, persuading people I was an open book while skipping entire chapters with a smile. My antics went as follows: looking down from the crow's nest where I had settled, I sketched scenes from my love life in a few playful strokes. Fear? Rejection? Sorrow? Male violence? All that was beneath me. I was untouchable, unmoved. In my life as a writer, storytelling had always been about gaining the upper hand, finessing control over the narrative. I had something to prove to myself and the world at large. But where was the truth in all this? Can you honestly claim control when you're lying to yourself and others? No, probably not.

My list of iconic conflicts between iconic brothers took shape along similar lines: playful and not entirely true to life. For me, life began in 1999 and I grew up as the eldest of three girls. Flo appeared in 2002, followed by Lotta in 2005. Right on cue, a birth every three years, punctuated by three miscarriages. No use crying over spilt milk, my mother would say. Besides, they were all boys: no place for them in our snug family unit. And my father would laugh the way he laughed at all my mother's pronouncements, with a mixture of love and stupefaction.

Girly-girls. Such a dated expression, but it describes my sisters and me perfectly. Glittery make-up, nail varnish, feather boas, a miniature tea set with pink roses. Looking back, I might as well have gone to an all-girls' school. Boys were a mystery to me, roaring across the playground, whacking each other with sticks, never standing still long enough for me to get a closer look at their grass-stained, gravel-grazed knees, bruised yellow and blue from all that whacking. I only knew there were bruised, dirty knees to inspect thanks to the rare examples of boyishness that found their way into our girly-girl household. Jim Hawkins, Huck Finn, the Bash Street Kids. They were the closest we came to having brothers, the closest we came to boys full-stop: two-dimensional, sandwiched between the covers of our children's books. In short, I was clueless.

Then, one morning, thundering over the cobbled roads of the Flemish Ardennes, my father told me about the Dassler brothers. It was one of many tales that had stuck with him since boyhood and that he felt the urge to share with me. Adolf and Rudolf Dassler jointly ran a shoe factory but

clashed so spectacularly that they ended up splitting the business and founding their own separate companies: one became Puma, the other Adidas. For me, the notion of a brotherly falling-out beyond reconciliation felt completely foreign. My sisters and I could be at each other's throats one minute and happily go back to braiding each other's hair the next. Later, Dad shared a similar story about a rift between the Albrecht brothers that led to the founding of Aldi Nord and Aldi Süd. At high school, a boy with a cowlick and an acoustic guitar filled me in on the Gallagher brothers and their band Oasis. From then on, I was drawn to stories of brothers in conflict and started keeping a list. I could never explain where this fascination came from, it took me years to find out.

There's a French expression that pops into my head with some regularity: *l'appel du vide*. It refers to that moment when you're driving on the motorway and feel a sudden urge to tug hard on the steering wheel. Or smoking on a fourth-floor balcony and your thoughts snap from taking your next drag to leaping off into space. These aren't suicidal thoughts, more fleeting moments of madness: your mind playing games with you and your perception of the world. For me, the essence of *l'appel du vide* lies in its literal translation: the call of the void. The abyss, the unknown. A siren song rising from the deep. What we don't know and fail to understand, even what we fear the most, draws us in endlessly. Not long after coming across that French term, I read *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004) by bell hooks. She opens her book with a confession, one she found hard to share: not only did she not understand men but she feared them too. She had also come to realise that people in general, a disproportionate number of women among them, struggled with those same feelings. In writing *The Will to Change*, hooks sought to arrive at a better understanding of men and, more importantly, to help men better understand themselves. She wrote it in the hope that, to some degree, all of us might be freed from these specific struggles and from patriarchal terrorism in general. This fear of maleness, she wrote, alienates men from all of the women in their lives, a loss that is felt by men too. 'Ultimately, one of the emotional costs of allegiance to patriarchy is to be seen as unworthy of trust. If women and girls in patriarchal culture are taught to see every male, including the males with whom we are intimate, as potential rapists and murderers, then we cannot offer them our trust, and without trust there is no love.' In this project, bell hooks succeeds by facing her own fear head-on. She found a way to tune in to *l'appel du vide*, the call of the void.

And so I decided to put my list of brotherly clashes to good use. To prick up my ears, to dig deeper. Inevitably, one crucial point kept resurfacing: I am not a brother, and I have no brothers. Writing about the unknown can be brave but can also come across as more than a little inept, or downright foolish. In the midst of my research into brothers, I unexpectedly had to move house. As I was packing, a slip of paper fell out of my copy of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993). It was a note from a boy I had lent the novel to years before. 'Hey Ibe, thanks for the book. It struck me as a deeply sensory, feminine novel. I really enjoyed it.' His choice of words surprised me: sensory, feminine. Eugenides goes out of his way *not* to capture the inner world of his protagonists Cecilia (13), Lux (14), Bonnie (15), Mary (16) and Therese Lisbon (17). At no point in the novel do we taste, smell, hear, feel or see as the sisters do. Looking back on their youth in a sleepy suburb in 1970s America, it's the former boys-next-door – grown men in the context of the book – who attempt to recount the fateful tale of the five Lisbon girls. The most famous quote comes from an exchange between Cecilia and the doctor who treats her after her first failed suicide attempt. The doctor adopts a paternal tone: 'What are you doing here, honey? You're not even old enough to know how bad life gets.' To which Cecilia replies, 'Obviously, Doctor, [...] you have never been a 13-year-old girl.' A sentence that speaks volumes. *The Virgin Suicides* is not a book about girls, it's a book about boys who look at girls and, dilettantes all, seek to unlock the mystery of the sisters, who in their eyes represent the 'unknowable' nature of girlhood.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, banal details and self-evident truths are romantically distorted by the unknowing gaze of the neighbourhood boys. One of them sneaks into the Lisbon home and returns

‘with stories of bedrooms filled with crumpled panties, of stuffed animals hugged to death by the passion of the girls, of a crucifix draped with a brassiere, of gauzy chambers of canopied beds, and of the effluvia of so many young girls becoming women together in the same cramped space.’ His tales turn an ordinary girls’ bedroom into a place both sacred and profane. Perhaps I shouldn’t have been so surprised that the boy I lent the book to resorted to words like ‘feminine’ and ‘sensory’. After all, he had never been a 13-year-old girl either.

How could I engage with my list of warring brothers without falling into the same trap as those boys, I wondered, maybe it’s similar to the way we perceive our own nose. We go through life oblivious to the fact that our nose is always in our field of vision. A neat trick of the mind, a distortion that filters the protuberance from view. If I genuinely wanted to take a long, hard, truthful look at my list of brotherly violence, I therefore had to keep tabs on my own nose and be alert to the subjective distortion of my own viewpoint.

The more closely I looked and listened, the more pages I turned in history books and gossip rags, the more journeys I made to places of note, and the more paintings I studied, the more I realised that I had no reason to fear the brothers on my list. The violence between them was defined by their blood bond; it turned in on itself rather than erupting outward. My fear centres on a very different band of brothers. I am afraid of bros.

There’s an undeniable link between a certain kind of non-biological brotherhood and violence. One study I read concludes that male students in the United States who join a fraternity (i.e. a brotherhood) in their freshman year of college are 66 per cent more likely than their non-fraternity counterparts to engage in sexually aggressive behaviour. When police succeeded in cracking the encryption on the SKY ECC cryptophones so widely used in organised crime, millions of messages plotting murder and torture entered the public domain. The word most frequently used in these exchanges was ‘bro’. Personally, I find few things more unnerving than navigating my way past a group of teenagers late at night and hearing them shout ‘Look, bro!’ at each other. *Bros before hos! Bros before hos!*

There I go again, persuading you that I’m laying myself bare while scampering back up to my crow’s nest. You see, I don’t want to write about how the indestructible bond between brothers from another mother is at the root of what happened to me when I was fifteen. I don’t want to write about the two boys who tried to rape me while a bunch of other boys watched and cheered them on. I don’t want to tell you that I counted each and every one of them among my friends at the time. That my first experience of sex was not only unwanted but the punchline to a joke I was expected to laugh at and keep to myself. That I remember the leather of the sofa sticking to my cheek when I woke with my tights yanked down around my knees. I don’t want to write about how it shaped me, how it made me a worse, not a better human being. There is no martyrdom here, no uplifting story, no narrative I can live with or sell or spin to satisfy the reader. But there is the audiobook of Annie Ernaux’s *Happening* (2000) and that one fucking sentence that made me weep in my own kitchen as I scraped the seeds from a red pepper one December evening: ‘These things happened to me so that I might recount them.’

There, plain as the nose on my face, was the fact that something had happened to me, something that made me fear bros. How could I start to write about this fear? By beginning with blood brothers, apparently. My list of brotherly conflicts became a shelter of sorts, a place in which I would rather not have stayed but where I could at least wring out my sodden socks and hang them up to dry. Writing about the six pairs of brothers who became the backbone of this book, along with the women, girlfriends and mothers drawn into their battles, became a way to structure my thinking about male violence and other issues that had been breathing down my neck and catching up with me every now and then I needed them and perhaps they needed me too.

Never stare directly at the sun, so the warning goes, or you'll end up with a black hole in your vision, no matter where you look. The best way to feel the sun is to close your eyes. This was the step that let me write myself back to my own experience. Where do the narrative and control over the narrative end? I walk the edges, trace the contours in baby steps and the call of the deep takes shape. I glance down. Far below, blood glistens.

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Romulus and Remus

I thought for a long time that this would be a chapter about motherhood. And in a way it is, only not the way I had in mind. I had travelled to Rome with my mother to set eyes on a statue of perhaps the most notorious surrogate mother in history: the *Lupa Capitolina*. The bronze figure of the she-wolf that found the infant twins Romulus and Remus washed up on the banks of the Tiber and kept them alive, suckling them so that one day Romulus, having murdered his brother, could go on to rule Rome.

But as I googled a city map that would meet my need for she-wolf- and twin-related info, it dawned on me that I didn't even know what Rome's founding myth had to say about the identity of Romulus and Remus's actual mother. How had that never occurred to me? How had I completely overlooked this woman?

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Rhea Silvia was her name. And long before her own sons had ruined each other's lives, she had been ensnared by an older brotherly conflict. On his deathbed, her grandfather had come up with the insane idea of leaving his crown to his son Numitor and his fortune to his other son, Amulius. You cannot rule without a fortune, and so power-hungry Amulius soon seized his brother's throne. For fear of retaliation, according to some versions of the myth, Amulius then went on to murder all of his brother's male heirs. Other versions say that Numitor only had one child, a daughter, Rhea Silvia. All accounts agree that Amulius forced her to become one of the Vestal Virgins, a venerable cult consisting of six celibate priestesses of the goddess Vesta, a non-lethal way of ensuring that she could not bear a child with a rightful claim to the throne. But Rhea Silvia had caught the eye of Mars, god of war. He raped her and, nine months later, she gave birth to twin boys, Romulus and Remus. She was punished for losing her virginity: depending on which version of the story you go with, this either meant imprisonment or being buried alive. Amulius then ordered the execution of the newborn twins, but the manservant charged with this task could not bring himself to kill the infants and instead set them afloat in a basket on the river Tiber.

In his book *Myth and Meaning* (1978), French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss writes, 'The problem is: where does mythology end and where does history start?' Here in the resplendent city of Rome, separating fact from fiction is an even more onerous, if not impossible, task. History and mythology form a sedimentary rock, one account piling on top of another, version upon version. Then again, perhaps sedimentation is not an accurate enough metaphor. The layers are far from distinct, carving out a cross-section offers no clarity. Everything turns to sludge. A muddy slurry that gives you, the swimmer, the illusion of solid ground beneath your feet only to give way within seconds of them touching down. As you sink, the slurry works its way between your toes and stays there. Herodotus, the father of modern historiography, was the first to make the distinction between mythology and history. To distinguish between the two categories, he came up with a procedure he called 'autopsy', derived from the Greek for 'seeing with your own eyes'.

The Vestal Virgins really did exist. Or so my own eyes tell me as I read the information panel. Under a clear blue sky on a crisp January day, I am standing in the middle of the Forum Romanum surrounded by people from all corners of the globe. 'This place could do with a tidy,' my mother observes. Sliding my sunglasses up, I stare a little harder, look a little closer. Rhea Silvia is nowhere to be seen. Rhea Silvia doesn't exist, has never existed. Yet, in a way, her pain is tangible. What does it say when the founding myth of a city is based on rape? When that story is passed down through the centuries? Claude Lévi-Strauss also writes, 'Myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him.' All I can do is fall back on the least meaningful string of words I know: this does something to me.

My therapist once told me that rape is seldom purely an act of lust or sexual desire; more often it's about power and control. This train of thought can be traced back to Susan Brownmiller, whose groundbreaking book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) points out that 'Rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.' (That said, it's worth noting that women are not the only victims of rape and that not all of the perpetrators are men.) Rhea Silvia's mandatory entry into the ranks of the Vestal Virgins was clearly about intimidation and, more specifically, control over the female body. Her fertility undermined the accepted channels of power: her descendants would always be in a position to directly challenge Amulius's claim to the throne. In a counterpoint to rape, she is condemned to a life without sex. But what part does power play in her rape? Mars is a Roman god and gods pay no heed to matters of consent: they are supposed to get what they want. A rejection, a refusal simply serves to undermine their power.

V But if Mars is a god, elevated and worshipped, why do the terms of the founding myth dictate that Rhea Silvia has to be raped? Why press home the point that this was something she absolutely did not want? It's such a weighty question because, in this narrative, her lack of consent, her victimhood, in no way acts as a mitigating circumstance with a view to restoring her integrity. Whether the act was consensual or not, as a Vestal Virgin, Rhea Silvia has to be punished for the loss of her virginity. Her perceived offence or crime is just as serious, whether she wanted to have sex with Mars or not. She will be locked up or buried alive, depending on your version of choice.

Why was it so crucial for the people of Rome that this was a rape? In my view, the answer is purity. It had to be rape to keep her promise, her honesty, her chastity and her immaculate moral standing intact. It was inconceivable that Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome, sons of Mars, could be born of a lustful woman, to say nothing of a fallen Vestal Virgin. Rhea Silvia's rape was a way to protect the narrative. Power and control are not only central to the act of rape, as my therapist says, but also to the accounts we give of rape. Can we characterise the need for purity that pulses through this founding narrative as a stylistic desire? An aesthetic component? And if so, what are the aesthetics of rape?

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Since the age of fifteen, I have been unable to listen to tracks that incorporate samples of screaming, begging or sobbing women: someone fearing for their life as the casual embellishment of a pounding bass and (almost inevitably) a male vocal. Maggie Nelson describes a similar response in *The Red Parts* (2007), a work of autofiction about the kidnapping and murder of her mother's sister Jane. 'During these years my mother and I went to the movies together quite often. [...] But a problem recurred – she couldn't tolerate scenes that involved the abduction of women, especially into cars, and she couldn't watch women be threatened with guns, especially guns pointed at their heads. Try going to the movies with this rule and you will be surprised at how often such scenes crop up.' Once you start noticing, hearing or seeing a particular thing you can't stop noticing it, hearing it or seeing it. Selective deafness can only be achieved by skipping to the next track or frantically plugging your ears; selective blindness by fleeing the movie theatre or keeping your eyes tight shut. Your teeth clench automatically. Insensitivity is the hardest muscle to train.

I found myself returning to that thought, while searching for the Lupa Capitolina, the bronze statue of Romulus and Remus drinking from the teats of the she-wolf. 'A few more rooms and it should be on the left,' my mother said. One of those rooms turned out to be a place that has occupied my mind ever since. THE HALL OF THE HORATII AND CURIATII, the panel reads. It's a large room with a black-and-white marble floor where – long, long ago – the *conservatori*, Rome's city magistrates, held their hearings. Apart from the statues of two popes at opposite ends, it is empty. The focus is on the walls, adorned with frescoes by Giuseppe Cesari between 1595 and 1640. In a heartbeat, I recognise the two chubby babies set in pastoral green: Romulus and Remus hanging from the teats of a she-wolf, hunched over them lovingly. But it's the fresco opposite that knocks me sideways. *The Rape of the Sabine Women*.

After Romulus and Remus discovered their true kinship, they decided to found a city of their own on the Tiber, the river into which they had been abandoned. But where exactly should the city be built? On that question, the brothers could not agree. They would let the gods decide. Romulus went to the Palatine Hill; Remus chose the Aventine. The brother who saw the most birds from the top of his hill would become the sole ruler of the city. Romulus counted more birds than Remus, and so the matter was settled. Remus, however, found it difficult to accept his fate and rebelled. A deadly quarrel followed, and Romulus killed his brother. But here Romulus encountered a second problem: how do you populate a new city?

His solution was simple: he welcomed everyone in, regardless of rank or standing. As a result, the future holy city became a magnet for criminals, outlaws and assorted misfits. This in turn generated another problem: these criminals, outlaws and misfits were primarily male. Just as well: it would have been a dark day for the city's future reputation if women of such loose morals had been permitted to give birth to Romans, or so it was believed according to *Women in the Classical World* (1994). The desire for female purity strikes again. And in this case too, rape proved instrumental in gaining control of the narrative.

Romulus hatched a plan. He organised games and invited the neighbouring Sabine people, assuring them that they and their entire families would be made most welcome. The Sabines were thrilled and came to attend the spectacle in their thousands. Only then, Romulus gave a sign and the men of Rome, who were in on the plan, seized the Sabine daughters, the virgins.

Hundreds of girls were torn from their families on the spot and dragged off to Rome, where they were raped. By the time the Sabines had prepared themselves for war and marched on Rome to liberate their daughters, instead of defiled hostages they found perfectly contented mothers. Stockholm syndrome *avant la lettre*: the women felt nothing but love for their Roman husbands, the men who had raped them. The Sabine virgins had reconciled themselves to the situation, so the story goes, and called on their people to do the same and go in peace. Fear not! Motherhood heals all wounds! The initial abduction might have been against their will, but the result apparently was not. In this chapter of Rome's founding myth too, it was crucial that the virgins had not wanted to have sex. In his account of the abduction, Ovid writes that the captured women were 'a joyful prize, and many made even fear itself look fitting' or in some translations, 'terror lent an added charm'. Again, aesthetic control over the narrative is very much in evidence: purity had to be guaranteed at all costs.

And then there are the aesthetic choices made by Cesari in his fresco: bodices stripped away, breasts bared, as if the Sabine virgins are to be raped then and there. The girls all wear the same look of resignation, the expression they will wear when the Sabine warriors come to save them: placid, impassive. Either that or Cesari wasn't much of a painter. Their bodies do betray the fear Ovid describes – or the attractiveness of that fear, depending on your perspective. Being dragged along, an outstretched arm here, a twisted leg there. Everything can and will be torn apart.

I can't help but wonder: how did people hold meetings against the backdrop of young women being torn from their families? In 1957, the Treaty of Rome, the founding document of the European

Economic Community, was finalised in this room. In 2004, the treaty to establish a constitution for Europe was signed here. How can you simply take your seat at the table in the presence of these painted images of women you know are being set upon to be penetrated against their will? And how can we do exactly the same as museum visitors? Raise our eyes for a moment or two and nod approvingly. 'Marvellous fresco.' 'Impressive work.' We came, we saw, we moved on to the next room. These women aren't real, I tell myself. I soothe myself like a child. My mother sees my frozen stare but I'm in no mood to talk. I keep silent about the things that hurt the most.

At the age of 22, I was dispatched to interview an artist three times my age about his debut novel. The event took place in the garden of a small bookshop in front of an audience that mainly consisted of the man's close friends. The rape of the Sabine women, or rather the version of this scene painted by Nicolas Poussin and completed in 1634, was central to the plot of his novel. The protagonist, also a celebrated artist, takes it upon himself to rework and update Poussin's painting. 'His rendition of the abduction is subdued, painted with less verve and audacity than his illustrious example. He tempers the colours. His figures, though in motion, appear static and reserved. Despite the violence of the subject matter, there is an absence of genuine, spontaneous emotion. The numerous variations on coerced sexual acts primarily demonstrate the aesthetics at play.' I recall my old notes in the margins, the handwriting girlish and rounded: 'What is it permissible to depict? Should everything be depicted?' I can't remember actually putting this question to the artist, which suggests I didn't. I probably didn't dare. Ten minutes in, it dawned on me that I had misread his book. The description of the artwork struck me as so excessive, I had read it as satire.

The novel continues: 'To underscore his vision – that the abducted women control the game, experience conspiratorial pleasure, that they are the resilient ones – [he] drew inspiration from the ravishing creatures who had found stardom in reality TV [...] The instigator of the Sabine sisterhood was given the legendary figure of Kim Kardashian. The mega-influencer's second-in-command was a bikini model, a skilled seductress from *Temptation Island*, a tattooed flash-in-the-pan who had perked up the media with her Brazilian butt lift and its 360 cc's worth of implants.' As the icing on the cake, the artist includes Nafissatou Diallo in the painting, the chambermaid who pressed sexual assault charges against former IMF director Dominique Strauss-Kahn. As my interview with the artist-turned-writer progressed, it became clear to me that he was more interested in striking a blow for libertine freedom of expression than the safety of women.

Perhaps I had tried too hard not to see what I was reading. Later in the novel, a young dramatist appears on the scene, a character swiftly pigeonholed as a media-obsessed, socially progressive moral crusader. She writes a scathing opinion piece about the artist's work. One of the main objections this 'tantrum-throwing hysteric' raises to the protagonist's reworking of *The Rape of the Sabine Women* is that the women he is depicting are real. My own objections run deeper, I realise as I gaze up at the fresco in Rome. Even this scene peopled by non-existent women, is more than I can take. It sickens me. I try to summon all the painted images I have seen of women in pain. I want to feel the rage, the sorrow, the fear experienced each and every one of them, real or not. I want to harness it, weaponise it. To reclaim everything the museum setting dilutes and filters out. I don't want 'aesthetics at play' in a tastefully lit curated space. I don't want anatomical correctness framed by decorative flourishes. I don't want draped fabrics or an evocative arboreal background. I want to tear it all down. I want to be unreasonable. I want purity, but not as a synonym for chastity. I want guilt exposed in its purest form and I want to see it with my own eyes. Romulus and Remus can go fuck themselves. In Rome, I am a tantrum-throwing hysteric.

After feeding terms into a search engine for a while, I stumble on a text that helps me get to grips with my tantrum. My own response has rattled me. Why am I suddenly possessed by the notion that

aesthetics is the antithesis of ethics? It feels like a reactionary sentiment, especially for a writer. Isn't phrasing things elegantly essential to what I do?

As part of her doctorate studies, Emy Koopman wrote a paper entitled 'Ethical challenges when reading aesthetic rape scenes'. In it, she cites Theodor Adorno's famous quote that, in the shadow cast by Auschwitz, writing poetry is a barbaric act. To describe violence, horror and evil aesthetically is to run the risk that a viewer or a reader who has not endured such suffering will derive a certain kind of pleasure or sensational gratification from the description. Representing sexual violence, Koopman argues, carries an even greater risk: the audience may derive not only aesthetic pleasure from the representation but also be sexually aroused by it. Rape, simulated or otherwise, is a far from unpopular subgenre of pornography. Which brings us back to Ovid: 'many made even fear itself look fitting'. How can you confront an audience with the reality of rape without sensationalising or sexualising the pain? One thing is crucial, Koopman writes: representing the voice of the victim.

I try to picture a painting that gives voice to the perspective of a Sabine virgin. It occurs to me that this might also be too reactionary a response. And so I mull over the fictional visualisations of rape presented to us in the here and now, scenes from film and television. One constant in such depictions is the disclaimer: this programme contains violence, scenes of a sexual nature and scenes some viewers may find disturbing. A sentence that sounds too much like an escape clause, placing responsibility squarely at the door of 'some viewers' and letting the makers off scot-free. Don't say we didn't warn you. It lends a bitter irony to the continuity announcer's cordial delivery.

Love triangles, cheating, blackmail, catfights, rape: they appear to be the lifeblood of every TV serial drama. In 2024, a complaint was brought against Flemish broadcaster VRT and its daily soap *Thuis* (Home). The woman who filed the complaint called for the series to be broadcast later in the evening, when younger viewers were less likely to be watching. A report on the media regulator's website fills in the details: 'In particular, the complainant makes reference to the character Lowie who subjected his girlfriend to violent rape and brutal humiliation.' In the end, the regulator ruled that the complaint was unfounded. A headline in the showbiz section of a Flemish newspaper revealed that the scene was 'so intense that it had to be changed'.

Possibly the most notorious visual representation of sexual violence this century is the single-shot nine-minute scene in Gaspar Noé's film *Irréversible*. Monica Bellucci plays Alex, a pregnant woman who is assaulted, subjected to anal rape and left for dead in a pedestrian underpass. When the film premiered at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival, 200 of the 2,400-strong invited audience walked out and twenty became unwell. An online video shows an interviewer badgering audience members for reactions on leaving the Cannes screening. Visibly shaken or incensed, the majority sweep past him with cries of 'Outrageous.' 'Disgusting.' 'Unwatchable.' 'Noé is mentally ill.' 'Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic.' I come across an exchange between two members of an internet forum. The first, *atclubsilencio* calls out *_Norman_Bates* for describing Noé's rape scene as 'not all that graphic'. 'I mean how much more graphic did you need it to be? She gets raped for nearly 10 minutes, is screaming for help, he's saying horrible, cruel, inhuman, demeaning things to her. Then beats her up, kicks her in the face, then bashes her face into the floor, before spitting on her.' *_Norman_Bates* replies that he had expected worse, that the rape itself mainly consists of the rapist on top of Alex while the camera shows her face. 'That's fine but it's not incredibly graphic like people describe it.'

His description is accurate. The scene is not shot from the rapist's perspective. The camera stays on Alex's face while she is being penetrated from behind. Many an academic and film critic has argued that this does present the voice of the victim, that we share Alex's pain and cannot identify with the rapist. I'm not sure I agree. Although the chosen perspective is more likely to distance you from the rapist, perhaps this shifts it even closer to the pornographic. As in standard pornography,

there are two people in shot, and the person looking at the screen becomes a spectator, a voyeur. The fact that Noé's scene is bathed in the warm, red light of the underpass does little to dispel the erotic connotations. When I google the scene, the first hit is for a website with the following slogan: 'We provide the hottest forced sex videos from movies and tv series. Legendary stars sexually abused in Hollywood rape and domination scenes. Their moans and facial expressions make it better than porn and are sure to push you over the edge.' Multiple posts of the scene from *Irréversible* can be found on websites with names like RapeTube and BestRapePorn.

I have never been able to make myself watch the full nine minutes without squeezing my eyes shut, plugging my ears. Rape filmed through the eyes of the victim, not with eyes on the victim: have I ever witnessed such a scene? Does one exist? A scene that dares to do more, to embody more. To tell us more about the experience than the 'standard crying-in-the-shower' shot after the assault, to use Sarah Projansky's phrase from *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*. A screen filled with the ugliness of a power-hungry face? Where only the background is in focus? A shot that focuses grimly on a single detail? Just as I can instantly recall the coat collar of a complete stranger who stalked me for months, but until the day of the court case needed a photo to recall his face. Just as I remember the leather of the sofa on which things were done to me, not the things themselves. No such scene comes to mind. Time and again, the camera shows me an attractive young woman, her hair framing her face, eyes glazed over, cherry-red lips twisted in fear, pinned down by the weight of the attacker slamming into her. Have I just been watching the wrong films, the wrong TV shows? I hope that's what it is.

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At last I find my way to the *Lupa Capitolina*, the work I came all this way to see: Romulus, Remus and the she-wolf. My mother is singularly unimpressed, but to me it's a revelation. It dawns on me that I need to focus more on her, the she-wolf. She too is at the heart of Rome's founding myth. Is the wolf another way to infuse the narrative with a kind of innocence? Is the notion of Romulus and Remus being suckled by an animal an alibi of sorts? Romulus's feral beginnings as a way to account for the brutal murder of his brother and the rape of the Sabine women?

Feral children, kids who have grown up without socialisation or human contact, have captured the imagination for centuries. I couldn't tell you when I first heard the name Kaspar Hauser but it must have been way back, because I think of him as a ghostly presence in our family living room. When we were young, my father read and re-read a mysterious black book, weighty with strange stories. One in particular seemed to have a hold on him: the true tale of a solitary boy who, one fine day in 1828, appeared on the market square in Nuremberg, repeating the same sentence over and over in an Old Bavarian dialect. 'I want to be a knight just like my father.' Kaspar was unable to walk properly and did not seem to understand what people said to him or even the meaning of the sentence he kept repeating. The boy was arrested and jailed as a vagrant, but the mayor of Nuremberg took an interest in him. Kaspar, who soon learned to speak, confided in the mayor that he had grown up in a dark cell so confined that he could neither stand nor sit. He claimed that he had not set eyes on another living being until shortly before being set free. The first was a masked man who taught him the sentence about wanting to be a knight and brought him to Nuremberg. Pedagogues, legal experts and other leading lights of the day racked their brains to unravel the mystery, which had captured the public imagination: where had he come from, this boy who had never learned to be human? A cycle of rumour and wild speculation rumbled on for decades. Was he an orphan? Of noble birth? Was it all just an elaborate hoax? The ins and outs of the case were never explained but, after serious scientific scrutiny, the current consensus is that the boy's tale was anything but the truth. In the court of public opinion, Kaspar Hauser has gone from being an innocent feral child, perhaps even of noble birth, to a liar and a charlatan.

Feral children can be divided into four categories: those found alone in the wild, those found among animals, those kept in isolation and the most frequent but not always acknowledged cases, modern-day feral children who often live in urban environments but remain socially isolated. Assuming his story to be true, Kaspar Hauser slots easily into the third category. Even so, he was often viewed in a compellingly Romantic light as being entirely one with nature in its purest, most untamed form. In his film adaptation of this tale, *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle* (1974), Werner Herzog includes a scene in which two young society ladies at a ball notice Kaspar and whisper to each other: 'Isn't he adorable?' 'Yes, a true child of nature.' This is typical of our perception of feral children: the first two categories (found in the wild or among animals) exert the greatest pull on our sense of fascination and wonder. Feral fictions from Mowgli and Tarzan to San from *Princess Mononoke* have all graced the big screen. Online, we have real-life footage of Oxana Malaya, sometimes referred to as 'the dog girl'. Born into extreme poverty and neglect, three-year-old Oxana, seeking shelter, crawled into the kennel behind her parents' farmhouse in Ukraine. The dogs accepted her as one of their own. When discovered by the authorities, aged eight, Oxana was unable to talk, made barking noises and exhibited dog-like behaviour. Multiple videos with sensational titles show Oxana jumping, running and eating on all fours.

The ethics behind such footage may be questionable, but the fascination is not hard to understand. Feral children blur boundaries, confronting us with our own conditioning as humans and our need for social structures. Our imaginations are readily inclined to see them as representations of a primal state, a notion of 'true nature' and, by extension, a kind of purity: these are children untouched by our society, our sins, our norms. And in that purity, in not knowing any better, there resides a sense of diminished responsibility, a claim to innocence. I am reminded of the character Spijtebijt from Annie M.G. Schmidt's children's book *Pluk redt de dieren* (Pluck Saves the Animals, 2004). This little boy (whose name is a rhyming mash-up of the Dutch words for 'sorry' and 'bite') is prone to fits of rage: 'He's a bit of an unlicked cub. That's because he was raised by bears in Canada. In the woods [...] He lived there till he was six, so he's never really learned to behave himself. He bites. And what's more: he throws things around. He throws everything around. But in the end, he's always sorry. Which is how he got his name.' Later, the book's hero Pluck decides that the bears probably raised the boy to bite things, so 'Spijtebijt can't help it'.

Romulus, as a feral child, could appeal to the same logic. He acted on instinct, unhindered by conscience. Wolves have no moral compass, feel no remorse. Yet there is also a strange duality at play. When we talk about extreme violence, about murder, about rape, the words 'beastly' or 'savage' are never far away, but not to absolve the perpetrator of guilt. In the news cycle, suggestions of the feral add a degree of severity to the crime. Glass half-empty: it makes for effective clickbait. Glass half-full: it's an expression of our collective powerlessness and incomprehension. However full or empty the glass, this discourse is seldom productive. It feeds a common myth about rape: the notion that all rapists are sinister men skulking in the shadows ready to pounce, like animals, like wild beasts. Not only is this wrongheaded, but given the very small percentage of rapists who are complete strangers to the victim, it is also dangerous. Every rape myth – from the idea that only young, attractive women are raped to the notion that women derive pleasure from rape and are somehow 'asking for it' unless they take the strictest precautions – further cements a culture of shame and silence. A friend of mine, whose job it is to safeguard women in the nightlife of a big city, once said that overstepping another person's boundaries is one of our most human tendencies (there are of course gradations of this), which is why it's so important not to fall for the monstrous, abject, animal narrative: it's only by seeing violation for what it is that awareness, responsibility and recovery become possible. To return to the words of Claude-Lévi Strauss: 'Myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him.'

Delve a little deeper and you start to question whether Romulus and Remus fit any of the four categories of feral children. According to the hardcore myth, the infants were only suckled by the she-wolf that found them stranded in the mud of the Tiber. A woodpecker kept watch and saw that it was good. The bird's presence is far from coincidental. The black woodpecker was associated with the war god Mars, as its scientific name *Dryocopus martius* attests: 'martius' means 'belonging to Mars'. The link is often attributed to a shared persistence: the bird will not rest until its beak penetrates the bark. A tree, a woman, what's the difference? The comparison is even more striking when you consider that Rhea Silvia's name is derived from *silva*, meaning forest. The woodpecker's presence writes the absent father back into the myth.

However, Romulus and Remus are not left in the care of animals for long. Their status as feral children is fleeting. A shepherd by the name of Faustulus soon finds the twins and takes them home with him. Back at the Capitoline Museums, a few rooms along from the *Lupa Capitolina*, a copy of the Peter Paul Rubens painting *Romulus and Remus* depicts this discovery. The vast canvas – two by two metres and dating from around 1613 – is action-packed. The wolf and the twins are centre stage. No less than three woodpeckers are in attendance and, on the right of the painting, Faustulus makes his entrance through the undergrowth. The left of the picture shows a muscular, bearded older man with a young woman at his side. Who might they be? The grizzled figure with the powerful body turns out to be the personification of the river Tiber, which saved the twins from drowning by washing them ashore. The young woman could be a water nymph but is more likely Rhea Silvia, the mother of Romulus and Remus. Her first name, Rhea, means flowing. How she managed to escape her cell or rise from her grave is something Rubens leaves to our imagination but his intention seems clear: to bring together in a single painting every figure either directly or indirectly involved in raising the iconic twins.

One figure is conspicuous by her absence from this alternative family portrait: Acca Larentia, the wife of Faustulus the shepherd. She would go on to bring up Romulus and Remus as her own, despite already having twelve sons to raise. That's pretty much all we are told about her, though the *Encyclopaedia of Gods* (1993) informs us that she later came to be worshipped as an obscure fertility goddess. Anthony Everitt's 2011 book *The Rise of Rome* posits that the wife of Faustulus was actually 'a woman of loose virtue' or a courtesan. In Latin, the word *lupa* (she-wolf) was a nickname for prostitute. This reading of Rome's founding myth restricts the lupine presence to a coded reference, a nudge and a wink: she-wolf looks better on paper than sex worker. Better to be raised by a wild animal than a woman who exploits her sexuality. Again, the aesthetic desire to secure purity as an element in the founding myth comes through loud and clear.

The substitution of the she-wolf also serves as a convenient reference to the 'natural' maternal instinct. The wolf fuels the idea of an inherent motivation in every female creature, an automatic predisposition to embrace the care of children. Perhaps unsurprisingly, real-life Romans who grew up on this myth came to see the she-wolf as a representation of fertility, an association so strong that, for centuries, a huge festival known as the Lupercalia was held between 13 and 15 February (1) at a cave where the wolf was supposed to have suckled Romulus and Remus. The festivities began with the sacrifice of a goat and a dog. The skin of the goat was then cut into thongs brandished by naked (later near-naked) young men, who ran around lashing out with them. The ritual was one of purification and a lash from one of these thongs was thought to boost a woman's fertility.

Lupercalia had a reputation as a feast drenched in blood, violence and sex. As such, it enjoyed huge popularity. The more I read about it, the harder it becomes to shake the uneasy feeling that this performative purification concealed a more abject agenda, all in the name of she-wolf, mother, child. One with links all the way through to 20th-century fascism. Mussolini, a sucker for all things Roman, repeatedly adopted the she-wolf as a symbol. Within Operazione Nazionale Balilla,

Italy's equivalent of the Hitler Youth, the section for boys between the ages of six and eight was called Figli della Lupa, Sons of the She-wolf. This weaponising of the symbol plays on the fascist idolisation of the fertile woman whose sole purpose is to give birth to pure-blooded children and protect this new life from outside threats. The mother fighting like a wolf or a lioness for her young remains a popular image in far-right propaganda. An unsavoury message lurks beneath this depiction of all that is supposedly pure and natural: mothers, do your duty for the demographic and racial purity of the nation.

My notebook fills with words: WOMAN, PURITY, BLOOD, CHILD, MYTH, REPRODUCTION, VIOLENCE. A tangle of lines and arrows forms around them, one I can never quite unravel.

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The last day in Rome brings me face-to-face with my own desire for purity. A longing to be untouched, to be blameless. Our visit coincides with a jubilee year and the Porta Sancta of St Peter's Basilica, normally sealed, has been thrown open to the public. As a rule, this happens only once every twenty-five years and millions flock to the Vatican to obtain an indulgence by passing through the Holy Door. They believe this brings them closer to salvation, absolves them of their sins. I stand before St Peter's. Beside me in the queue, the light on the vane of a fellow visitor turns green, as if to grant me access. I am not Catholic, I have never been baptised, yet I feel a burning desire to be part of the ritual. The door is there in front of me. I think of the people I have hurt, pain inflicted for the understandable and paradoxical reason that I have counted very few days without pain since I was fifteen.

How do you forgive others? Find forgiveness? How do you forgive yourself? I think about Rhea Silvia, the Sabine women, Romulus and Remus. I think about feral children, about Acca Larentia. Here I am at the epicentre of Catholic power. I think of all the victims of the church, the victims who became perpetrators and the perpetrators who became victims. I think of the chilling accounts of child sexual abuse. Of Sinéad O'Connor tearing up a photograph of Pope John Paul II on *Saturday Night Live*. I think about the narrative choices made to maintain the image of sanctity. How easy is it to wash your hands in innocence? To close your eyes? Plug your ears? Thoughts like a punch to the gut. My mother reaches out and takes my hand.

(1) Some historians see a link with our modern Valentine's Day celebrations on 14 February.
