

Can Serrat Checkpoint: Emilia Phillips

During my three weeks at Can Serrat, I worked on two essays for my nonfiction collection *Wound Revisions* and drafted four poems for my fourth poetry collection *Thunder Thighs*. In this checkpoint, I have included a two-page excerpt of “Heaven and Men and Devils,” the essay that explores my relationship with my namesake Emilia from Shakespeare’s *Othello*, toxic masculinity, and female friendship. I completed this essay, and I will be sending it out to literary magazines for possible publication soon. I have included photos of the notebook in which I was taking notes for my essay “Sqar,” a work that attempts to connect my facial scar with my queerness, the ways in which the scar gave me permission to acknowledge that I wasn’t comfortable being as femme as I was presenting myself. Of note are the doodles I made to help me better understand my embodiment and mental health. Please also note that the Kader Attia exhibit *Scars remind us that our past is real* was also incredibly relevant to this essay. Also, I have recorded myself reading an excerpt of “Heaven and Men and Devils.” Thank you so much for a wonderful residency!

—Emilia Phillips, August 7, 2018

HEAVEN AND MEN AND DEVILS

My mother first read my name in Mrs. Turner's eleventh grade English class at Central High School, *home of the Purple Pounders*. By the time she named me more than ten years later, she didn't remember much of anything about the wife of *Othello's* villain Iago. "I looked through my Shakespeare book," she texts me. She's always pleased to tell the story, I know. "I hate my name Janet, so it seemed like a huge responsibility to name someone. But I found Emilia in that book and I thought it was perfect." Another time, she told me: "I knew at once that name was yours, as if you were telling me yourself."

~ ~ ~

It starts to rain in the fifth act, during Desdemona's murder. It's staged gruesomely in this Shakespeare in the Park production directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson. After Desdemona pleads to live for half an hour more and Othello denies her, after she pleads to live for the length of a final prayer and he pronounces it *too late*, and as he lifts her up as if in a desperate embrace and seizes her throat, squeezing her windpipe closed, as she beats his chest until she loses herself to quaking limbs, I lose my body, all of it. A lit wick gasped out to a thin possibility. The struggle onstage is sustained realistically, a purgatorial sentence. Something moves through the crowd, something like a gust of wind that rushes through a house and slams all its doors. The white noise of our collective breath collapses to a restless decibel line. I leave my body whenever a threat is present or re-lived deep in the muscle. But you say *return* with the hand you hold. My body, I place all of it in that hand, the way surgeons bundle together the nerves of an amputated limb and fold them in a pocket of skin. I feel a single plosive syllable of rain on a knuckle, and for a delusional moment I think I can feel the rain that falls on you too—your exposed shoulder, your tearless cheek, the center line of a woman's chest we say is *cleaved*.

~ ~ ~

My mother likely didn't revisit the play when she chose my name, didn't follow my namesake to see her speak out against Othello and Iago, their separate but comorbid treacheries. After Emilia's speech in which she names the crimes of these men—*because* of it—she's murdered by her husband.

~ ~ ~

I have never been hit, except by accident. Once, my husband turned over in his sleep and elbowed me in the eye. I yelped and, when he waked, he wrapped his arms around me and apologized again and again—*I'm sorry, so sorry*. His tears, faint beetles in my curls.

In Meg Freitag's first book *Edith*, I read a poem with these lines: "I can't stand the way men touch / Gently after knowing they've wounded you."

~ ~ ~

Mounted on the wall above my teenage bed was a lamp, a metal box that framed purple plastic on which DREAM was printed in white. Well into my teenage years I slept with a light on because I was afraid of the rapists, kidnappers, and girl murderers about whose inevitability my parents warned. For this reason perhaps, I've always been a restless sleeper—I move and kick and turn. One night during the tenth grade, dead asleep, I knocked the lamp off the wall with a errant fist. A corner hit the flesh pillowed in my eye socket, leaving me with a cut and a beet-colored bruise, lids swollen like lips.

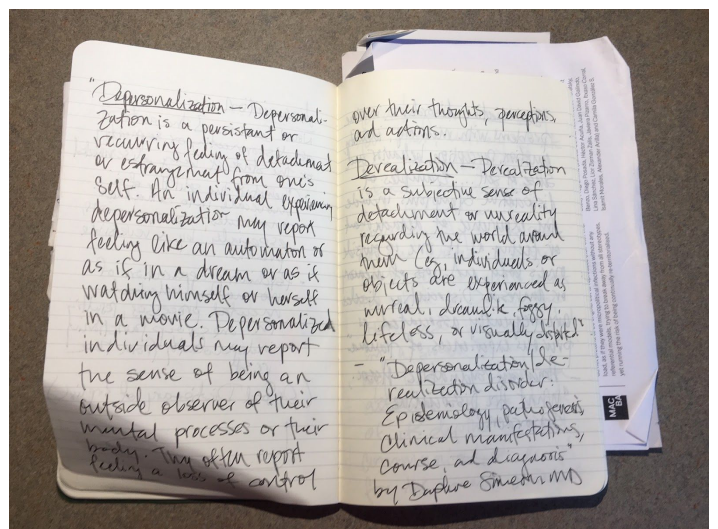
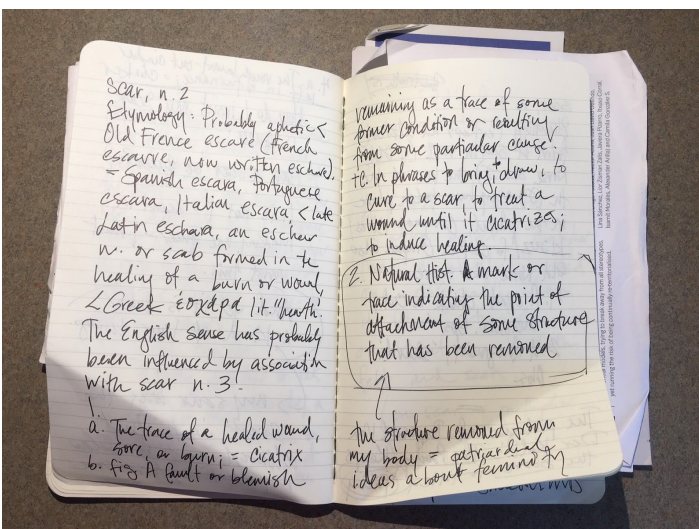
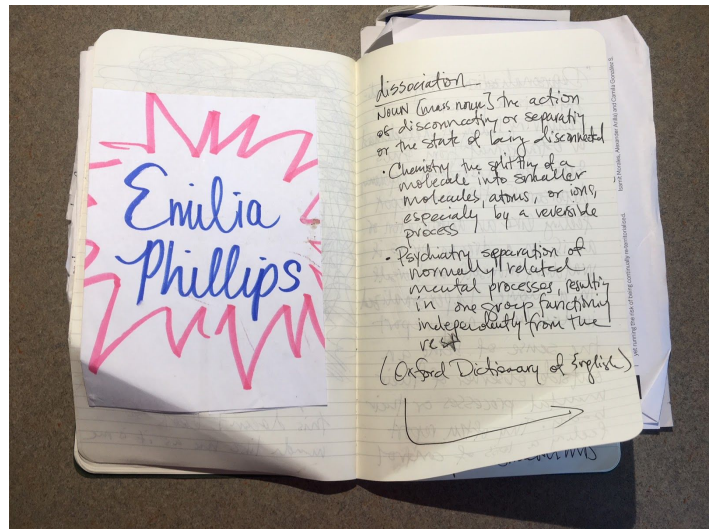
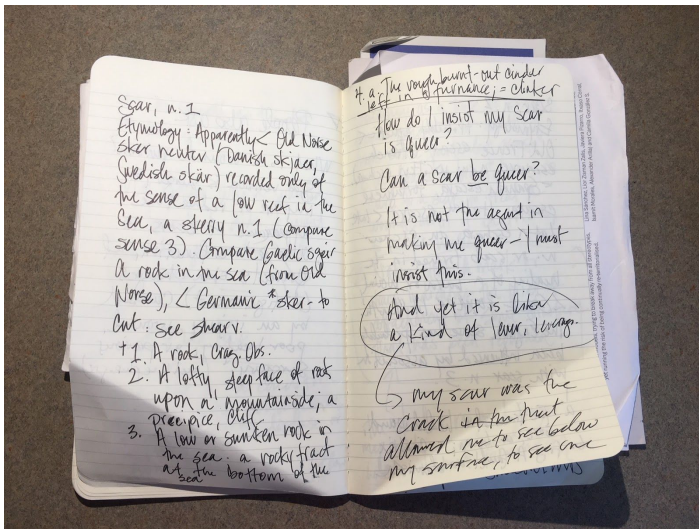
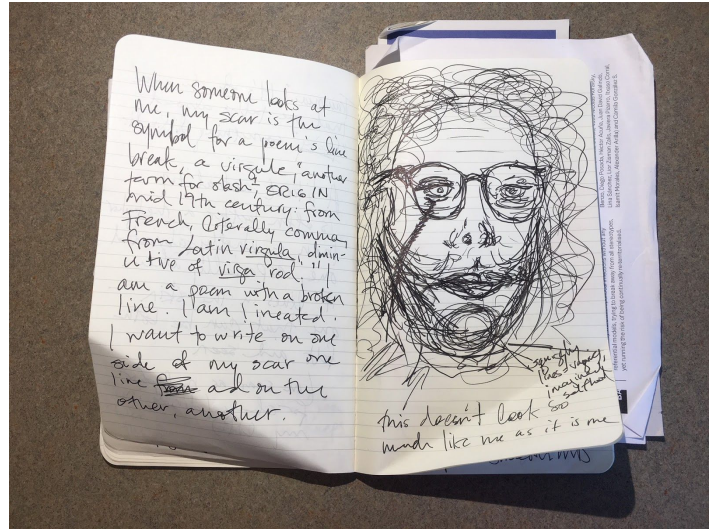
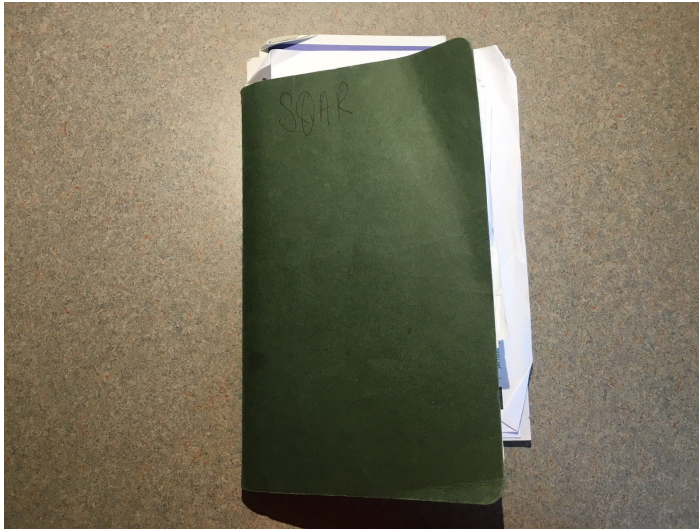
At school the next day, I was called down to the office during first period. Mrs. Parrot, the guidance counselor with a full lattice of braces and rubber bands she twanged with her tongue, sat me down with a box of tissues and asked who had hurt me. When I told her about the lamp, she kept insisting that I didn't have to lie, that I didn't have to protect anyone.

You've got to remember who did this to you, she said, her hand on mine. I closed my good eye as she stared at me, so I could only see her vaguely in soft mounds of blur. *I'm going to ask you this again: what really happened to you?*

~ ~ ~

You is a difficult address, albeit the most common one. The *you* can be implied, and you are. I admit it—I imagine you as the audience for everything I write, ideal ear and muse-holler. My dearest one, who knows. But anyone reading this might mistake themselves in *you*, and I can't pretend they aren't here too. For their sake, I might have to tell you things you already know.

~ ~ ~



"Dissociative disorders" involve problems with memory, identity, emotion, perception, behavior and sense of self... Examples of dissociative symptoms include the experience of detachment or feeling as if one is outside one's body, and loss of memory or amnesia. Dissociative disorders are frequently associated as previous experiences of trauma.


- American Psychiatric Assoc.
 "What Are Dissociative Disorders?"

For a long time, my body felt other, entirely separate from my selfhood, past, present, my mind, my thoughts and feelings, as if I were floating on the surface of the water, a bright boat gleaming white, almost too white to see, in the sun, and below, connected by a small chain, was my body, a deep sea creature in the dark of its depths, without communication except for the small clinks of

The chain, almost imperceptible, on my hull, with the waves.

The chain was my scar.
 Or should I say the scar was my chain?

In which configuration is ~~the~~ ~~scar~~ ~~chain~~ metaphorical? Scar is real in "The Chain was my scar" because "chain" is localized, identified in the real. Scar is metaphorical when →



at the very end, Fundación Joan Miró to see Kader Attia's "Scars remind us that our past is real" exhibit. Attia is an Algerian-French artist who won the Miro Prize this year - I especially loved the fabric canvases with raised embroidery (scars), the slides of WWI soldiers with disfigured faces, the wooden heads on pedestals (like disfigured Messerschmidt's character heads) in front of a film. I was also incredibly interested in the cut mirrors, the "repaired" ceramic and glass.

Kader Attia
Scars remind us that our past is real

15.06 - 30.09.2018