

Sabrina Benaim's "explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*" and Blythe Baird's
"WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY" as Social Activism
Spoken Word Poetry and the Destigmatization of Mental Illness

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Abstract

In this thesis I analyse the poems “explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*” by Sabrina Benaim and “WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY” by Blythe Baird through the lens of depression and anxiety, and eating disorders respectively, to examine the interplay between social activism, spoken word poetry, destigmatization, and mental illness. I discuss these poems through the lens of social activism to show that the poets, as representatives of the spoken word community, take action to promote changes in the existing social order where mental illnesses are continuously stigmatized. I show how Benaim and Baird help the reader to acquire a greater sense of understanding and empathy for people with a mental illness – thus destigmatizing mental illnesses – in four ways. Firstly, by presenting something relatable and then applying it to the experiences of the poet. Secondly, by countering stereotypes and common misconceptions about their mental illnesses. Thirdly, by putting into words the complexity of mental illnesses. Lastly, by conveying that recovery is possible. I explain how both poets embody the text through rhetorical techniques, gesture, tone, rhythm, and emotion, turning it into a lived – rather than read – text. This lived text creates a space for the audience to experience what the poets discuss in their texts, further facilitating understanding and empathy. I exhibit how Benaim and Baird help to destigmatize mental illness by creating a platform for their audience to discuss their struggles and build a community.

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Introduction

On January 20, 2021, at the inauguration of the new American president Joe Biden, Amanda Gorman caught the attention of people across the globe with her performance of "The Hill We Climb." In her spoken word performance, she reflected on the state of America, or maybe even more so: on the state of American wellbeing. The amount of attention this poem attracted is not new; it follows a tradition that spoken word poet Neil Hilborn started in 2013, when his performance of "OCD" went viral. Both poems thematize (mental) wellbeing and address the struggles related to it. These struggles often have a stigma around them (Corrigan and Watson 16). This stigma on mental illness is addressed in spoken word poems such as "explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*" (Benaim 6-8) and "WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY" (Baird 3-6). I use the following definition of spoken word, offered by *Poetry Foundation*:

Spoken word is a broad designation for poetry intended for performance. Though some spoken word poetry may also be published on the page, the genre has its roots in oral traditions and performance. Spoken word can encompass or contain elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater, and jazz, rock, blues, and folk music. Characterized by rhyme, repetition, improvisation, and word play, spoken word poems frequently refer to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community. Related to slam poetry, spoken word may draw on music, sound, dance, or other kinds of performance to connect with audiences. (Poetry Foundation)

In their research, Borelius, Lindhardt and Schalling show the consequences of the stigma surrounding mental illness. They state that this stigma "may reduce their [people with a mental illness] willingness to seek care and reduce the success of rehabilitation efforts, along with an already reduced life quality" (225). Breaking this stigma is therefore vital to improve the livelihood of people with a mental illness.¹

Spoken word as a medium lends itself especially well to this, since what spoken word poets do – perform on emotionally charged topics and social problems – is a form of social activism. By

¹ I have made the informed choice to write "people (living) with a mental illness" throughout this thesis, rather than "suffering from." I also refer to "usual" or "typical" situations, rather than "normal" (Bulthuis).

interviewing poets active in the spoken word community, Alvarez and Mearns have discovered that what these poets have in common is a “motivation to become spokespersons for underappreciated and voiceless members of the community” (267). In other words, spoken word is often a matter of social activism, which is defined by Briscoe and Gupta as “instances in which individuals or groups of individuals who lack full access to institutionalized channels of influence engage in collective action to remedy a perceived social problem, or to promote or counter changes to the existing social order” (4). Sabrina Benaim and Blythe Baird, as members of the spoken word community, take action to promote changes in the existing social order where mental illnesses are continuously stigmatized.

There are many studies available on mental health and poetry (e.g., Kaufman and Baer), often ending up in the field of bibliotherapy (e.g., Leedy; Raingruber; Mcardle and Byrt; Furman; McPherson and Mazza). The conclusions of these studies on mental health and poetry all show that poetry benefits mental health and destigmatization. According to Bonnie Raingruber, “passive suffering is changed to a creative act” in all poetry (13). However, what sets spoken word apart from traditional poetry is that this art is simultaneously a creative act and an act to promote change in the existing social order. In the article “The ‘Backbone’ of Stigma: Identifying the Global Core of Public Prejudice Associated with Mental Illness,” Pescosolido, Medina, Martin and Long claim that larger cultural expressions not only help to break the stigma surrounding mental health, but are necessary for doing so, since “a focus on small-scale individual-level efforts, even if successful, will continually confront negative reinforcement from the larger culture” (858-59).

What is interesting about the research on spoken word to date, is that it focusses largely on one practical setting, namely the one of youth and school (e.g., Boudreau; Sparks and Grochowski; Fiore; Fisher; Scarbrough; Coppola, Woodard and Vaughan). These studies have focussed on how spoken word can be useful in (high) schools, how it can be taught to students, and how (urban) teenagers and children respond to, or engage with it. A shared conclusion of these studies seems to be that embracing diversity in spoken word enables children to share their own perspective, while learning from others, thus developing more empathy and understanding.

Because I am pioneering in academic research in this field, there are no secondary sources directly addressing the destigmatizing effect of social activist spoken word on its audience, in the

context of mental illness. I therefore use articles on the relationship between poetry and mental wellbeing and destigmatization, together with literature on the effect of writing/performing spoken word on mental health, literature on spoken word in the practical setting of school, and close reading techniques to support my claims. Furthermore, I explore the effect of spoken word performances on its audience, by analysing the top comments posted by viewers below YouTube videos of two performances (Button Poetry, *Blythe Baird*; Button Poetry, *Sabrina Benaim*).

In this thesis I use “explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*” by Sabrina Benaim to focus on depression and anxiety, and “WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY” by Blythe Baird to focus on eating disorders. I use anorexia as an example of eating disorders. I look at these poems in the context of destigmatization of these mental illnesses. To define destigmatization, I place it opposite stigmatization, of which I use the following definition: “stigma refers to a deeply discrediting attribute, reducing a person from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one” (Goffman qtd. in Feigelman, Gorman, and Jordan 593). Destigmatization would then be the act of restoring a person to a whole and usual individual. I want to place emphasis here as well on the importance of empathy and understanding in the process of destigmatization, as is explained in the first section of chapter one. I analyse aforementioned poems as published texts and performances through the lens of social activism and discuss the audience response to the performances. I then formulate an answer to the following research question: In what ways does spoken word poetry by Blythe Baird and Sabrina Benaim help to break the stigma around the mental illnesses depression, anxiety, and eating disorders?

Chapter One

Analysing “explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*”

Before analysing the poem, I show two general ways in which Benaim and Baird help to destigmatize mental illness with their poems. The first is simply that they decided to write poetry on this topic, since: “[p]oetry helps us discover and reflect on other’s feelings while developing empathy” (Akhtar qtd. in Raingruber 13). In their article “Destigmatization and Health: Cultural Constructions and the Long-Term Reduction of Stigma,” Clair et al. explain the correlation between empathy and destigmatization as follows: “when the dominant public lacks empathy and a sense of connectedness with a stigmatized group, they are less likely to see its plight as problematic and when people fail to see another group’s circumstances as problematic, they are unlikely to seek out or support social change” (Clair et al. 224). Thus, a sense of empathy, as provided by poetry, is crucial to destigmatization.

Closely related to this is that a lack of understanding of mental illness, as well as scornful portrayal of mental illness in media, encourages people to ‘other’ those with a mental illness (Richmond 19), further stigmatizing them. This connects to a recent study that shows how a better understanding of mental illness leads to more empathy regarding people with a mental illness (Naylor, Cowie, Walters, Talamelli, and Dawkins qtd. in Richmond 23). This means that talking about mental illness in an ‘educating’ manner, helps to destigmatize it. Both Benaim and Baird tell their stories in such a manner. Richmond also states how reading about mental illness helped her students to reconsider common stereotypes of mental illnesses (Richmond 24). In their poems, Benaim and Baird also refer to and break these stereotypes, as is discussed in chapters one and two.

In this chapter, I analyse the poem “explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*” by Sabrina Benaim. The poem (Appendix I) discusses the difficulties Benaim encounters while trying to explain her mental illness to her mother. In this analysis, I refer to the lyrical I of the poem as Benaim, since Benaim has talked about her own experiences with depression and anxiety in an interview with *The Arts Guild* (The Arts Guild). I first discuss how lack of empathy and understanding are problematized in the poem. I then discuss how the poem helps to destigmatize depression and

anxiety in three ways. Firstly, by showing something relatable and applying it to Benaim. Secondly, by countering stereotypes and common misconceptions about depression and anxiety. Thirdly, by putting into words the complexity of mental illnesses. I discuss these aspects of the poem, because they help the reader to acquire a greater sense of understanding and empathy for people with a mental illness, which is a vital aspect of destigmatization, as explained above (Clair et al. 224).

1.1 Lack of Understanding and Empathy

In this poem, Benaim tries to educate her mother about her mental illness, hoping to win her empathy and compassion. The poem reflects on an attempt to make someone that is not familiar with depression understand what someone with depression experiences every day. It appears there is no actual conversation taking place, but Benaim and her mother talk at cross purposes. The cursive part of the title, “*a conversation*” seems to further underline this. It raises the question whether her mother is willing to learn about Benaim at all, or if she is just trying to prove her daughter wrong. This becomes evident through the repeated lack of empathy her mother shows Benaim. A clear example can be found in lines 46-50, when Benaim tries to explain to her mother that she cannot simply decide to be happy, that she feels empty, as if her happiness is always fleeting. Her mother then disregards her feelings by saying she is “making something out of nothing” (49).

The cursive of “*mom says,*” also raises another possibility: Benaim could be having the conversation in her head before it takes place. This possibility is interesting considering the common feature of anxiety to overthink and worry about all types of situations, fearing the worst possible outcome (United Kingdom National Health Service, *Anxiety*). The unfolding of this worst possible outcome can be seen in how the poem starts out slow and gradually picks up speed as more frustration about not being understood enters the poem. The ending (67-70) then shows helplessness and defeat. Feeling helplessness is common in depression (United Kingdom National Health Service, *Symptoms – Clinical*), but also striking in this situation, as her mother (unknowingly) denies Benaim support by not understanding her. We can learn from this poem how understanding leads to empathy, because we see the opposite in how Benaim’s mother is unable to understand Benaim, and therefore feel compassion for her, no matter how hard Benaim tries to explain her situation to her mother.

1.2 The Relatable versus the Personal

In this poem, Benaim repeatedly portrays situations relatable to teenagers without a mental illness, to then add a sentence to illustrate what life is like for teenagers with depression and anxiety. A clear example can be found in lines 21-24, where the relatable situation is that of “the cousin visiting from out of town” (21) that someone “felt obligated to bring to the party” (22). She then relates this situation to herself by saying “i am the party. / only, i am a party i don't want to be at” (23-24). By adding this last sentence, on the one hand, she makes a clear contrast between a usual situation (everyone can experience this) and her situation (she experiences this because of her depression), highlighting the differences between the two. On the other hand, this sentence could make readers realize “there is very little that actually separates us from ‘the other’” (Furman et al. 340), thus restoring the ‘other’ to a whole and usual individual.

Another way in which Benaim creates this shift of perspective is through personification: she portrays a relatable situation, but changes the person in this situation into her illness. This helps to portray her illness as more humane, and therefore makes it easier for the reader to empathize, understand, and normalize her mental illness. In the previously mentioned example of lines 21-24, Benaim changes the cousin into anxiety and the person bringing the cousin to the party into depression. In lines 3-5 she compares her depression to both a firefly and a bear, making concrete the size of its effects. In lines 34-37, Benaim describes her relationship with insomnia almost as if she were in a loving relationship with it: “each night, insomnia sweeps me up into its arms, / dips me in the kitchen by the small glow of stove light. / insomnia has this romantic way of making the moon / feel like perfect company” (34-37). Readers can relate to this description by replacing ‘insomnia’ with the name of their lover. This stanza also shows how people with a mental illness can grow attached to their illness because it has started to define them (Scott; Noonan; Syed). In the beginning of the poem, Benaim already mentions this: “besides, mom, i'm not afraid of the dark” (14).

1.3 Stereotypes and Common Misconceptions

Benaim, in lines 47-48 counters her mother’s belief – and common misconception – that “happy is a decision” (46). This sentence, visually, is at the middle of the poem. It is not only at the centre of the

body of text, but also at the centre of the message this poem conveys: being happy is not a decision for someone with depression. Lines 31-32 show a clear example of this: “it's just not that much fun having fun when you don't / want to have fun” (31-32). Later in the poem, Benaim talks about her depression in a more physical manner. The line directly after the one where her mother says “happy is a decision” (46), is already an example of such a physical description: “my happy is a high fever that will break” (47). This could represent the comparison between a physical and a mental illness that people with a mental illness often make to illustrate the importance of recognition of their illness. You cannot tell a person with a broken leg to ‘just start walking’ to feel better. Similarly, you cannot tell a person with depression to ‘just choose to be happy’ to feel better. Everything a person with depression does is impacted by their depression, since they often live with continuous sadness, feelings of hopelessness and irritability, and find it extremely difficult to be motivated, have interest in anything, or get enjoyment out of life (United Kingdom National Health Service, *Symptoms – Clinical*). These symptoms make it impossible for a person to just decide to be happy and have fun.

Another common misconception about depression that Benaim tries to counter regards death and suicide. A student that took part in one of Richmond’s courses on literature and mental illness “reflected on the stigma that ‘suicide has been given by society; that everyone who thinks about suicide will go through with the act, or everyone who has a drinking problem, cuts, restricts food, or purges is going to commit suicide’” (Richmond 24). In lines 50-52 this becomes clear when Benaim’s mother asks her if she is “afraid of dying” (50) and her response is “no, / i am afraid of living” (51-52). Her mother seems to think that Benaim is considering suicide, while Benaim is not planning to end her life, but rather looking for ways to live her life without fear again.

Furthermore, Benaim shows that people with depression are not ‘too lazy to get out of bed,’ but are kept there by their depression (60). She shows how sleep for her is a way to cope with loneliness (58-59). Throughout the poem she mentions pieces of advice often given by people not familiar with depression and explains why these are not useful for a person with depression. She shows that the problem is more complex than people seem to think. Examples of these advices are lighting candles (8), going to parties/seeing friends (25-26), and counting sheep (38).

1.4 Complexity of Mental Illnesses

Benaim already shows the complexity of depression, when she refers to it as a “shape shifter” (2) in the beginning of her poem. She proves how, for people with mental illnesses, “poetry is a vehicle through which to express the complexities of their conditions” (Furman et al. 334). Her depressive symptoms are always present in a variety of different forms, so it is difficult to define them accurately, let alone to explain them to an outsider. This becomes especially clear in lines 15-20, where Benaim tries to explain to her mother that there is not just one specific thing, but rather a combination of things, complicating her life. Her mother is unable to understand that ‘depression’ is, amongst other things, not being afraid of the dark (14), not being able to get out of bed (17-18), and living with anxiety (19-20).

However, it is not just Benaim’s mother who struggles to understand her illness; Benaim does not understand her illness, or feel like herself, either. This can be seen clearly in lines 64-70, where she claims to be a “careless tourist” (65) in her own body and ends her poem by saying “mom still doesn't understand. / mom, / can't you see? / neither do i” (66-70). This lack of self is also visible in the lack of capitals in the poem: even the i’s are small letters, breaking language to hint at the fact that the I of Benaim is barely present, almost fully overtaken by her depression. This symbolizes the common symptom of loss of self(-esteem) of depression (United Kingdom National Health Service, *Symptoms – Clinical*). With the ending of the poem almost being a plea for help, resonating in the void, it becomes painfully clear that Benaim is denied a conversation by her mother. She is therefore also denied the possibility to better understand herself by talking to someone about her confusion.

Another element that shows the complexity of mental illnesses is that of repetition. This is noticeable in the way the poem progresses: Benaim says something, which is followed by “*mom says.*” The poem thus presents a repetitive conversation: it shows how Benaim time and time again has to justify and explain herself and her illness to a person who does not understand her. This matches the earlier mentioned lack of empathy of her mother; repeatedly Benaim is denied compassion. Furthermore, just like the poem, the drag of a mental illness is repetitive: you get stuck in the same routines, thought processes and coping mechanisms, unable to pull yourself out (Cherry). This can be seen especially well in lines 53-59, where Benaim explains how she taught herself to turn “the anger

into lonely, / the lonely into busy” (55-56), and in repetitive phrases of time as “each night” (34) and “always” (60).

Lastly, the complexity of mental illnesses is shown by conveying the disorientation and chaotic thought-process of someone with anxiety to the reader (United Kingdom National Health Service, *Symptoms – Anxiety*). The poem moves quickly, like an actual conversation, and is often lacking punctuation and capital-letters, making it difficult to see where one sentence ends and the next begins. Because of this, the reader can experience part of the disorientation and turbulence, but also the flattening numbness, that a person with depression and anxiety experiences daily (Gotter).

Chapter Two

Analysing “WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY”

In this chapter I analyse the poem “WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY” by Blythe Baird. The poem (Appendix II) discusses how no one sees Baird’s eating disorder as a problem, but rather congratulates her on being an overweight girl who lost weight. In this analysis, I refer to the lyrical I of the poem as Baird, since Baird has made it known in an interview with *HuffPost* that this poem is about her own experiences with anorexia (Vagianos). In this chapter I discuss how the poem helps to destigmatize anorexia, as an example of eating disorders, in four ways. Firstly, by showing something relatable and then applying it to Baird. Secondly, by countering stereotypes and common misconceptions about anorexia. Thirdly, by putting into words the complexity of mental illnesses. Lastly, by showing that recovery from anorexia is possible. I discuss these aspects of the poem, because they help the reader to see a person with a mental illness more “as a total human being rather than a discrete list of clinical symptoms” (Raingruber 18), thus destigmatizing mental illness.

2.1 The Relatable versus the Personal

In this poem, Baird repeatedly shows something teenagers do, and modifies it in the light of weight, to illustrate what life is like for teenagers with anorexia. This can already be seen in the beginning of the poem, when in the second line vodka is mixed with vitamin water. Vodka is often mixed with soda by teenagers, but Baird mixes it with vitamin water, since that contains fewer calories. A more striking example can be found in lines 5-10, where Baird juxtaposes using diets she found on the internet with what her diets are: “menthol cigarettes, eating in front of a mirror, / donating blood / replacing meals with other practical hobbies / like making flower crowns / or fainting” (6-10). This juxtaposition is taken even further by the fact that menthol cigarettes and donating blood, both ordinary things, are compared to eating in front of a mirror, and the claim that fainting, just like making flower crowns, is a practical hobby. Another interesting example can be found in lines 11-12, where a common thought for all girls, “wondering why I haven't had my period,” is juxtaposed, by the words “in months,” with

a symptom of anorexia: the absence of periods (United Kingdom National Health Service, *Symptoms – Anorexia*).

2.2 Stereotypes and Common Misconceptions

One common misconception not directly present in the poem, but still important to counter in the context of this thesis, is that of eating disorders as a physical illness. Even though eating disorders manifest themselves in a highly physical manner, they are a mental illness: “An eating disorder is a mental health condition where you use the control of food to cope with feelings and other situations” (United Kingdom National Health Service, *Overview*).

The most important stereotype Baird counters in her poem is that people with anorexia are skinny. Even on official health websites, such as that of the United Kingdom National Health Service, most anorexic symptoms focus solely on skinny people. Their list of symptoms include: “if you're under 18, your weight and height being lower than expected for your age,” “if you're an adult, having an unusually low body mass index (BMI)” and “believing you're fat when you're a healthy weight or underweight” (United Kingdom National Health Service, *Symptoms – Anorexia*). Even though they state at the top of the page that both men and women, of all ages, can get anorexia, they do not specify that people with all body types/weights can get anorexia as well. This is incredibly striking, since their definition of anorexia itself – “trying to control your weight by not eating enough food, exercising too much, or doing both” – is inclusive of people with a higher than usual weight (United Kingdom National Health Service, *Overview*). In this poem, Baird not only shows us what living with anorexia is like, but also how people respond to anorexia “when you are not thin to begin with” (46). In this case, people look at her illness as a “success story” (47). Her father, for example, is proud of her weight-loss (33-35) and even says “he is *just so glad* to finally see me / taking care of myself” (40-41). In reality, Baird is doing the exact opposite. When people congratulate her on her rapid weight-loss in high school (48-52), she tries to explain her situation by saying “*I am sick*” (53). However, the others do not see her illness and, instead of showing concern, simply say “*No, you are / an inspiration*” (54-55). This statement connects to something Kia Jane Richmond addresses in her article “Using Literature to Confront the Stigma of Mental Illness, Teach Empathy, and Break Stereotypes.” She

explains how reading about mental illness, can help people to become “aware of the power of language choices and to become empowered to confront the stigma associated with mental illness” (Richmond 24). Seeing how mental illnesses can be worded, as well as grasping their mental illness into words, can give people a sense of control or agency, since it gives them the opportunity to “resist false constructions of their lives and experiences” and define themselves instead (Sparks and Grochowski 8). Language can both be empowering, as well as a “site of struggle” (Sparks and Grochowski 8). In Baird’s poem we see how calling her illness an inspiration is both further stigmatizing her illness and making her illness worse: “why would I ever want to stop / being hungry / when anorexia was the most / interesting thing about me?” (60-63). This poem thus shows the power of language choices considering destigmatization. By referring to Baird’s illness as something to be proud of, the possibility to have a conversation with her surroundings about the seriousness of her illness is lost, thus further stigmatizing her illness. If her surroundings instead would refer to her illness as such, this conversation could take place, creating an opportunity to learn about Baird’s illness. The comments by her father and classmates might not be intended in a harmful manner, but still turned out to be damaging, because of the lack of knowledge of her surroundings.

2.3 Complexity of Mental Illnesses

Baird, just like Benaim, shows that she has grown attached to her illness because it has started to define her: “how could I not fall / in love with my illness? / with becoming the kind of silhouette / people are supposed to fall in love with?” (56-59). It is common for people with a mental illness to fear recovery: they have gotten so used to their illness being a big part of their life that the thought of getting better feels similar to them to the thought of losing a part of their identity (Scott; Noonan; Syed). Baird, however, also shows that she has managed to contain this fear and get better: “my story may not be as exciting as it used / to be, but at least there is nothing left / to count” (72-74).

Most stanzas in the poem consist of two lines, which could represent the duplicity of her illness. How she knows she has a problem, but her surroundings motivate her to continue her behaviour. It could also show the fight between her two identities: ‘fat’ and ‘skinny.’ Baird mentions how she has experienced all extremes considering weight: “by the time I was sixteen, I had already

experienced / being clinically overweight, underweight, and obese” (27-28). Baird’s poem represents the constant fight with her illness to gain the ‘perfect’ weight. This is evident in the first – “the year of skinny pop and sugar-free jello cups” - and last – “*small*” - line of the poem. Even though Baird tells us in between those sentences that she is recovering, her poem still begins and ends with her anorexia telling her to be skinnier. This shows the complexity of mental illnesses particularly well, since it shows that even during recovery, mental illnesses are still at the back of one’s mind.

Additionally, Baird makes it possible for the reader to experience the physical, as well as the psychological pain that comes with an eating disorder (Richmond 21). Baird makes her complex physical experiences accessible to the reader by using easy and accessible language. She describes the reasoning behind the physical pain she is causing herself in such a manner that the reader can understand her more easily. She uses images that might not directly be relatable to the reader, but contextualises them by offering short anecdotes and concrete situations so her pain becomes more tangible to the reader. An example can be found in lines 77-82: “I used to love the feeling of drinking water / on an empty stomach / waiting for the coolness to slip all / the way down and land in the well / not obsessed with being empty / but afraid of being full.”

2.4 Recovery

From line 64 onwards, the tone of the poem becomes more hopeful, showing that Baird has started to work on her recovery: “so, how lucky it is now, / to be boring” (64-65). This recovery is crucial to Baird herself, because by choosing to recover, she is choosing to live: “if you are not recovering / you are dying” (25-26). As mentioned previously, despite the hopeful turn the poem is taking, its last sentence is not. This shows recovery in a more realistic light: recovery is not easy, and one is most likely going to relapse in the process, but this does not mean one is failing to recover (National Eating Disorders Association). Baird also directly talks about how difficult recovery is in lines 87-91: “this was the year of eating / when I was hungry / without punishing myself / and I know it sounds ridiculous, / but that shit is hard” (87-91). It is important that she shows how difficult recovery is, and how likely one is to relapse in the process, since these components of a mental illness are hardly discussed and therefore as much of a stigma as mental illness itself. Even on official health websites,

such as that of the United Kingdom National Health Service, nothing of this sort is mentioned (United Kingdom National Health Service, *Treatment*). This lack of information on what recovery is like, makes it more difficult for people with a mental illness to see a way out of their struggles. When they are in recovery and relapse, it might feel like a huge setback for them, while it is as much part of recovery as the triumphant days. The feelings of failure and shame that often accompany relapse (Discover Recovery; Sack; Wyatt), could cause people to further stigmatize themselves. By speaking up about the difficulties of recovery, Baird helps to break the stigma around them, and paints a more realistic picture of what recovery is like. This could help others to move forward in their recovery, without feelings of failure and shame. By interviewing poets active in the spoken word community, Alvarez and Mearns discovered that these poets are trying to establish a “sense of hope and possibility for the future” (Alvarez and Mearns 266). Baird manages to do exactly that by showing her readers that she is getting better. People who struggle with a mental illness can now feel empowered by her, since she has already experienced something similar to what they are experiencing (Furman et al. 340). By sharing how she managed to recover, regardless of the difficulties she faced, Baird has turned herself into someone to admire, she has gained an exemplary function. The same can be said about Benaim, who, in her poem does not necessarily show her recovery, but her ability to ask for help, to open up about her mental illness to her mother. A necessity to share poems in an effective manner, according to Furman et al., is that of contentedness with “his [the poet’s] own feelings of powerlessness and questions about his own capacity to help” (Furman et al. 335). Yet, because of their exemplary position, Benaim and Baird have the capacity to help through the social engagement of their texts and performances. In the following chapter I elaborate further on the performative aspect of spoken word, as well as its effect.

Chapter Three

Spoken Word Poetry, Performance and Community-Building

In this chapter I analyse a performance of “explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*” during the National Poetry Slam in 2014 and one of “WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY” during the National Poetry Slam in 2015. Both performances took place in Oakland, California.² Firstly, I discuss how the stigma surrounding mental illness is broken orally and how the text is embodied. Secondly, I discuss the textual differences between the written text and the performed text and the consequences of these differences. Lastly, I look at the audience response by examining the comment section below the YouTube videos. In this last section I also show how both Benaim and Baird help to destigmatize mental illness by creating a platform for their audience to discuss their struggles and build a community.

3.1 Performance

In spoken word poetry, performance of the text is at least as important as the text itself (Somers-Willett 52). During a performance, the words of the text are given a body, they are enacted by the poet. Furthermore, the identity of the performer itself is embodied and enacted (Somers-Willett 56). A useful tactic for this is the use of a first-person narrator, which implies a personal involvement of the performer (Raingruber 18) and creates a vision of the performance as a “confessional moment” (Somers-Willett 52). A poem as a confessional experience can be seen as an example of testimonial language, which “legitimizes and makes visible that which has been veiled or invisible in the dominant media culture thus providing alternative knowledges” (Sparks and Grochowski 13-14). An important aspect of spoken word is that of the “performance of marginalized identities” (Somers-Willett 66). By

² Because I focus on the live performances and their effect on the audience, I wanted to recreate the setting of the event. To do this I would need some more information on how the NPS took place in 2014 and 2015: what was the size of the audience present, what was the atmosphere, were people able to talk to the poets afterwards, et cetera. I contacted *Button Poetry*, since they represent both Benaim and Baird, and published the videos of these performances on YouTube, hoping they could provide me with some more information regarding these performances. They responded to my email, saying they “do not collect data from the audiences,” but “just record the poems and post them online.” They recommended that I reach out to the poets themselves, which is a work in progress.

using a first-person narrator in their performances, Baird and Benaim thus help to destigmatize mental illness.

According to Susan Somers-Willett, equally important to the message of the text, is *how* this message is conveyed to the audience in a performance (Somers-Willett 52). Kathryn Boudreau similarly states: “The language of the poem, the poem’s frame, and the performance meld to create a powerful oral piece. All of the traditional ‘rules’ of substantial poetry writing apply, but the slammer can twist the rules to create a transformational poem” (Boudreau 11). The most common aspect of traditional poetry that spoken word poets play with, is that of rhetorical techniques. Examples of rhetorical techniques used by most spoken word poets, including Baird and Benaim, involve repetition, homophonic word play, and rhyme (Somers-Willett 52). Most spoken word poets, including Baird and Benaim, tend to avoid complicated metaphors and gilded words, because they make it more difficult for their audience to directly understand their performance (Alvarez and Mearns 265).

Other important aspects of the performance of a spoken word text are gesture, tone, rhythm, and emotion (Boudreau 3). Because spoken word poets rarely perform with their physical text in their hands, this leaves space to literally embody the text and convey another dimension of meaning from the text to the audience. Both Benaim and Baird tend to move their hands to the rhythm of their voice. Baird also moves her hands to signal different parts of an enumeration (e.g., 0:20-0:23 and 1:01-1:03), to illustrate her words, e.g., when her hand imitates a bowl (0:50) and an apple (2:11), or to put extra emphasis on certain things, e.g., her head (2:23). Compared to the controlled and composed movements of Baird, Benaim, during most of her performance, is shaking and looks rather stiff, almost as if she does not want to be on stage telling this story. From 2:40 onwards she starts to use hand and arm movements to put extra emphasis on what she is saying. However, Benaim portrays herself as a lot less composed than Baird. As will be discussed in the next section, spoken word performances are lived instead of read. The difference in movements between Baird and Benaim is therefore likely to represent the difference of their situations: Baird is recovering, while Benaim is still in the middle of the chaos. This also becomes visible in their use of tone and rhythm. Kathryn Boudreau states the following regarding tone: “The language of the poem and the intonation of the poet labor in unison to rivet the audience to the work” (Boudreau 7). This is the case for both Baird

and Benaim. Baird's tone in the beginning is calm and composed, mockingly cheerful at her own 'diets' and 'practical hobbies,' yet gradually becomes quicker, louder, and more emotional when she discusses how no one was willing to listen to her. She pauses and calms herself at 2:05, after which she states that she is recovering. This pause emphasizes the importance of the possibility to talk about eating disorders. In contrast, Benaim's tone is hysterical from the beginning, and leaves her out of breath and gasping for air. Her last "mom" (3:11) is almost screamed out in despair and pain. This enables the audience to feel the pain and panic that Benaim experiences daily, that her mother is not able to understand. For both poets, their rhythm is "alternately fast paced, repeated, or stuttered," which represents the fact that "[e]xploring and reinventing language and creating powerful representations is sometimes fluid, sometimes strident" (Sparks and Grochowski 16). Baird and Benaim are not used to talk about their mental illnesses and therefore appear to struggle to find words for their experiences. Gesture, tone, and rhythm all help to showcase the emotion that is already present in a performance. As will be discussed in the next section, spoken word performances are strongly impacted by how poets experience their poem in the moment. By performing a poem, poets can add their own feelings to their words (Boudreau 1): in the voices of Benaim and Baird the audience can hear their emotion.

Their poems are emotionally charged in three dimensions: their topics, the way they are written (repetition and word play), and their performances. Through their empathy, the audience shares the feelings and struggles of the poet (Kaminsky qtd. in Raingruber 13) and therefore better understands these feelings and struggles (Raingruber 19). Furthermore, by "stimulating emotion she [the poet] disrupts and destabilizes the dominant discourse" (Sparks and Grochowski 13). This means that by performing a poem emotionally charged in three dimensions, Baird and Benaim try to create an emotional space. In this safe space the audience can experience what it is like to be like them, to experience what they address. The poets create space for a new discourse, one where mental illness is not stigmatized.

3.2 Textual Differences

One of the key differences between a spoken word text and performance is that the audience can give direct feedback on the work; in fact, participation is essential to the performances (Boudreau 1). This means that the audience either stays quiet, whistles, applauds, screams, or makes affirmative, or shocked noises. In Baird's performance at 1:36 (after lines 42-47), for example, the audience produces a collective 'oh' or 'ah.' Throughout Benaim's performance, the audience is heard making all of the above noises. When a certain type of text is rewarded with a positive audience response, the identity performed can become the new expectation of poetry performances and thus the new norm (Somers-Willett 56). If performances on mental illnesses are rewarded by positive audience response, it will become more popular to perform texts on experiences with mental illnesses, thus further helping to destigmatize the topic.

As opposed to written poetry, the audience response not only gives poets the opportunity to receive feedback from their audience regarding their work, it also gives them the opportunity to change the performed text, or the performance itself (Boudreau 3). I discuss some of the most striking changes in the texts of Baird and Benaim here. In appendix III a complete list of differences between the published and the performed texts can be found.³ Spoken word is an art form that is lived instead of read by both the audience and the poet. This explains why the performance of a text is different each time it is performed: the poet is a different person each time the poem is performed and will therefore experience the poem and the performance differently each time. In Baird's text, an example occurs in line 4 (0:16-0:17), where she uses the words "thigh gaps" instead of "collarbones." This is a very striking change, since in 2015, when she performed this poem, there was a big controversy around the trend of having a thigh gap (Kozicka), while in 2019, when her book was published, collarbones just started to come back as trend – and controversy – of 2019-2020 (Solanki; Manchanda; Qian). Baird used the ability to change her text, to make her text and her performance timelier and more relevant, and therefore more relatable to the larger public. Maybe the clearest example of a lived

³ The performances of the texts were uploaded before the books were published. However, it is uncertain which of the two versions (published or spoken) existed first, since you still need to have written a text to perform it. However, for the reasoning and reflection presented in this section it is not relevant which version existed first, because I do not refer to either as original text.

performance can be found in Benaim's text: before line 34 (1:27-1:32), Benaim pauses to catch her breath and then starts her text again with the words "you see mom" that are not present in the published version of the poem. She lives through the conversation with her mother again, while the words "you see" also make the audience seem like the person she is talking to. During her performance, she is in dialogue with her mother as well as the audience, explaining her illness to them.

Because poets experience and live through their poem each time, the audience can experience part of what the poets are going through. Poets can thus sculpt the way their audience looks at and feels about the topic of their poetry (Raingruber 19). This makes it possible for spoken word poets to use their work to advocate for change and destigmatize mental illness. Lived performance, the most important characteristic of spoken word, is simultaneously a means for social activism. Through their three-dimensional emotional performances, spoken word poets can connect with their audience, possibly "establishing a long-lasting effect through their work" (Alvarez and Mearns 265).

3.3 Community-Building

To get an idea of the audience response to both performances, I looked at the twenty 'best' comments⁴ for each of the performances. The performance of Benaim has a total of 8.394 comments. The 'best' comment, with 7.200 likes and 96 answers is "**All parents should watch this**" (Leslie Abreu). The performance of Baird has a total of 2.929 comments. The 'best' comment, with 6.600 likes and 8 answers is "'not obsessed with being empty, but afraid of being full'" (CosKC Cole). These top comments represent the rest of the comments rather well, as will be outlined in the examples below. The comments below Benaim's video can be divided in four categories. Firstly, the urgency and importance of the video: "She's screaming what everyone else is afraid to whisper..." (TJ Rollins). Secondly, how viewers showed it to their own parents to start a conversation about their depression: "don't mind me sending this to my mom" (Ariana Mathews). Thirdly, the highly emotional performance of Benaim: "she was actually having an anxiety attack while doing this, hence why her face turns all red. she is a brave amazing woman" (Bunni Namikaze). Lastly, their own experiences

⁴ On YouTube, you can sort comments below videos on "best comments" or "newest comments first." I sorted the comments on "best comments" and looked at the first twenty that appeared.

with depression and being misunderstood: “the worst part of depression is... **no one believes you...**” (epiqhxnny :O). Something similar occurs in the comment section below Baird’s video. There, people often copied lines they related to, sometimes including that they related to these sentences, sometimes also including why. Examples of these comments are: ““if you are not recovering, you are dying”” (luca alfie), ““Said he is just so glad to finally see me taking care of myself?... damn... that hit home”” (Lotte van der Wilk), and ““Looking at an apple as an apple, not 60 calories or half an hour of pushups’ this is exactly what I’m suffering with, the calculator in my head spinning”” (Alyssa Nering). Furthermore, the comment section was used to discuss own experiences with eating disorders and connect to others. An example of a connecting comment is ““I only feel pretty when I’m hungry’ I thought I was alone.. Who else feels this way?”” (x tonib x). This comment has 1.500 likes and 22 answers. As an example of a comment relating experience with eating disorders, I selected a passage from a comment by ZeeBee:

I feel like I’ve found a mirror of myself in this. Family at my auntie’s birthday complimenting me on my weight loss and telling me how great I looked, not knowing I would purge what we ate for lunch, and have 6 laxatives, just to be sure not one calorie of my undressed salad would be absorbed. After 2 years, I gave up on my anorexia. Not to heal myself, but because I had no willpower left. I quickly became overweight again. And with that came the concern and disappointment from family.

(ZeeBee)

Important to note here is the fact that in the analysis of both comment sections, as well as in the analyses of the published texts, the relatable versus the personal plays a big role. According to Furman et al., the degree in which a spoken word performance is deemed successful is highly dependent on the ability of the poet to create a work that allows the audience to relate it to their own experiences (Furman et al. 341). Alvarez and Mearns agree with this when they state that for many spoken word poets, it is a desire to share both their own story, as well as that of their audience, who might not have a voice themselves (Alvarez and Mearns 266). In fact, many spoken word poets feel the need to create a “forum for shared experience” (Alvarez and Mearns 263). By sharing their own struggles and how they overcame them, spoken word poets can reach people with similar experiences to offer them a

sense of social support. Poets can show their audience they are not alone: “Making oneself vulnerable will show that ‘it’s ok to be that way and not make them [the audience] feel like it’s something they should shy away from’” (Alvarez and Mearns 265). The comments just discussed suggest that this is exactly what Benaim and Baird have done for their audience: their poems have brought people together. They have created a platform to discuss personal struggles, a “sense of unification through life’s struggles” (Alvarez and Mearns 265).

The advantages of the platform and community created by Benaim and Baird are twofold. Firstly, the created spoken word community and feeling of connection therein help to refrain isolation, confinement, and harmful mental practices, this in stark contrast to traditional poetry (Alvarez and Mearns 267; Sparks and Grochowski 6). Secondly, through the use of this platform, ‘domino-destigmatization’ takes place. What I mean by this term, is that hearing people speak up about their experiences, can motivate others to speak up as well. Kia Jane Richmond, in one of her classes on literature and mental illness, gave her students the opportunity to share their own experiences with (reading the assigned books on) mental illnesses through blog posts. She discusses the case of one of her students as follows:

Another student shared in her blog her hesitation with sharing her own personal account of having a mental illness. She related that she felt like she was “telling a secret that shouldn’t have been told,” a secret that her family kept for years. Moreover, she was surprised that she chose to share her experiences with a people she hadn’t ever met in person. She said that despite her family’s tendency to be quiet and not to “highlight the issue of mental health,” her decision to self-disclose was based in part on reading others’ blog posts in which they shared accounts of how mental illness affected their own lives. (Richmond 23-24)

This phenomenon also appears in the comment section of both videos, where people talk about their own experiences and other people – strangers to the original poster – then reply to this comment with both caring and motivating words, as well as their own story. Benaim and Baird thus help to destigmatize mental illness by creating a platform for their audience to discuss their struggles and to build a community.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have analysed the poems “explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*” by Sabrina Benaim and “WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY” by Blythe Baird through the lens of depression and anxiety, and eating disorders respectively. I have discussed these poems in the context of social activism to show that the poets, as representatives of the spoken word community, take action to promote changes to the existing social order where mental illnesses are continuously stigmatized. I have shown the interplay between social activism, spoken word poetry, destigmatization, and mental illness. By using close reading techniques, I have analysed how both published texts help to restore individuals with a mental illness to whole and usual individuals in three ways. Firstly, by showing something relatable and then applying it to the experiences of the poet. Secondly, by countering stereotypes and common misconceptions about the mental illness. Thirdly, by putting into words the complexity of mental illnesses. These aspects help the reader to acquire a greater sense of understanding and empathy for people with a mental illness, which is a vital aspect of destigmatization. Both poems also show how a lack of understanding and empathy makes it impossible for a conversation to take place, which further stigmatizes mental illness. Baird also helps destigmatization by showing that recovery from an eating disorder is possible, while Benaim shows her ability to ask for help. Furthermore, I have analysed a performance of “explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*” and one of “WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY.” I have shown that rhetorical techniques, gesture, tone, rhythm, and emotion, as important aspects of a spoken word performance, help to embody the text and destigmatize the mental illness discussed through a three dimensional emotional performance. I have highlighted the textual differences between the written and the performed text to show the importance of direct audience feedback and the importance of the performance as a lived instead of read text. A lived text creates a space for the audience to experience what the poets discuss, which facilitates greater understanding and empathy. Lastly, I have examined the audience response by exploring the comment section below the YouTube videos of the performances. I have then shown how both Benaim and Baird help to destigmatize mental illness by creating a platform for their audience to discuss their struggles and to build a community.

Since this is the first project that has focussed on the interplay between social activism, spoken word poetry, destigmatization, and mental illness, future research regarding this interplay is much needed. Future research could focus on other spoken word poets or poems, as well as other mental illnesses. Furthermore, it could prove insightful to design empirical studies to investigate the effect of spoken word texts and performances on the audience that I have discussed theoretically. Lastly, I have discussed the importance of a community of direct response, where conversations in response to the videos take place. Future research could focus on the continuity of this community on other platforms and consider to what extent and in what ways such communities and (newly formed) connections turn out to be durable.

Appendix I – “explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*” – Sabrina Benaim

explaining my depression to my mother

a conversation

mom,

my depression is a shape shifter;

one day it is as small as a firefly in the palm of a bear,

the next, it's the bear.

those days i play dead until the bear leaves me alone.

(5)

i call the bad days

the dark days.

mom says try lighting candles.

when i see a candle, i see the flesh of a church.

the flicker of life sparks a memory younger than noon;

(10)

i am standing beside her open casket,

it is the moment i realize every person i ever come to know

will someday die.

besides, mom, i'm not afraid of the dark,

perhaps that is part of the problem.

(15)

mom says i thought the problem was

that you can't get out of bed?

i can't.

anxiety holds me hostage inside of my house, inside of my head.

mom says where did anxiety come from? (20)

anxiety is the cousin visiting from out of town

depression felt obligated to bring to the party.

mom, i am the party.

only, i am a party i don't want to be at.

mom says why don't you try going to actual parties? (25)

see your friends.

sure, i make plans.

i make plans but i don't want to go.

i make plans because i know i should want to go,

i know at some point i would have wanted to go, (30)

it's just not that much fun having fun when you don't

want to have fun.

mom,

each night, insomnia sweeps me up into its arms,

dips me in the kitchen by the small glow of stove light. (35)

insomnia has this romantic way of making the moon

feel like perfect company.

mom says try counting sheep.

my mind can only count reasons to stay awake.

so i go for walks, mom, but (40)

my stuttering kneecaps clank like silver spoons

held in strong arms with loose wrists.

they ring in my ears like clumsy church bells,

reminding me i am sleepwalking on an ocean of happiness

i cannot baptize myself in. (45)

mom says happy is a decision.

my happy is a high fever that will break.

my happy is as hollow as a pin-pricked egg.

mom says i am so good at making something out of nothing,

and then flat out asks me if i am afraid of dying. (50)

no,

i am afraid of living.

mom, i am lonely.

i think i learnt it when Dad left;

how to turn the anger into lonely, (55)

the lonely into busy.

when i tell you i've been super busy lately,

i mean i've been falling asleep watching sportscenter on the couch

to avoid confronting the empty side of my bed.

my depression always drags me back to my bed (60)

until my bones are the forgotten fossils of a skeleton sunken city.

my mouth, a boneyard of teeth broken from biting

down on themselves.

the hollow auditorium of my chest swoons with echoes

of a heartbeat, but i am a careless tourist here, (65)

i will never truly know everywhere i have been.

mom still doesn't understand.

mom,

can't you see?

neither do i. (70)

Appendix II – “WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY” – Blythe Baird

WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY

the year of skinny pop and sugar-free jello cups

we guzzled vitamin water and vodka

toasting to high school and survival

complimenting each other's collarbones

trying diets we found on the internet:

(5)

menthol cigarettes, eating in front of a mirror,

donating blood

replacing meals with other practical hobbies

like making flower crowns

or fainting

(10)

wondering why I haven't had my period

in months

why breakfast tastes like

giving up

or how many more productive ways

(15)

I could have spent my time today

besides googling the calories

in the glue of a US envelope,

watching *America's Next Top Model*

like the gospel,

(20)

hunching naked over a bathroom scale shrine,

crying into an empty bowl of Cocoa Puffs

because I only feel pretty

when I'm hungry

if you are not recovering

(25)

you are dying

by the time I was sixteen, I had already experienced

being clinically overweight, underweight, and obese

as a child, *fat* was the first word

people used to describe me

(30)

which didn't offend me until

I found out it was supposed to

when I lost weight, my dad was so proud

he started carrying my before-and-after photo

in his wallet (35)

so relieved he could stop worrying
about me getting diabetes

he saw a program on the news
about the epidemic with obesity,

says he is *just so glad* to finally see me (40)
taking care of myself

if you develop an eating disorder
when you are already thin to begin with,

you go to the hospital

if you develop an eating disorder (45)
when you are not thin to begin with,

you are a success story

so when I evaporated, of course
everyone congratulated me

on getting healthy (50)

girls at school who never spoke to me before
stopped me in the hallway to ask how I did it

I say, *I am sick*
they say, *No, you are*

an inspiration (55)

how could I not fall
in love with my illness?

with becoming the kind of silhouette
people are supposed to fall in love with?

why would I ever want to stop (60)
being hungry

when anorexia was the most
interesting thing about me?

so, how lucky it is now,
to be boring (65)

the way not going to the hospital
is boring

the way looking at an apple
and seeing only an apple, not sixty

or half an hour of sit-ups (70)
is boring

my story may not be as exciting as it used
to be, but at least there is nothing left

to count

the calculator in my head (75)
finally stopped

I used to love the feeling of drinking water
on an empty stomach

waiting for the coolness to slip all
the way down and land in the well (80)

not obsessed with being empty
but afraid of being full

I used to take pride in being able to feel
cold in a warm room

now, I am proud I have stopped (85)

seeking revenge on this body

this was the year of eating

when I was hungry

without punishing myself

and I know it sounds ridiculous,

(90)

but that shit is hard

when I was little,

someone asked me

what I wanted to be

when I grew up

(95)

and I said,

small

Appendix III – Textual Differences between Performances and Published Texts

In the comparisons in this appendix, I first mention the published text, then the performed text.

“explaining my depression to my mother / *a conversation*” – Sabrina Benaim

- Title of video: Sabrina Benaim - Explaining My Depression to My Mother
- Line 5: “those days” vs. “on those days”
- Line 10: “life” vs. “a flame”
- Line 10: “a memory” vs. “of a memory”
- Line 12: “realize” vs. “learn”
- Line 19: “hostage” vs. “a hostage”
- Line 30: “at some point” vs. “sometimes”
- Line 34: “each night” vs. “you see mom, each night”
- Line 34: “into” vs. “in”
- Line 35: “by the small glow” vs. “in the small glow”
- Line 35: “glow of stove light” vs. “glow of the stove light”
- Line 39: “my mind” vs. “but my mind”
- Line 40: “so i go for walks, mom” vs. “so i go for walks”
- Line 47: “my happy” vs. “but my happy”
- Line 47-48:
 - my happy is a high fever that will break. / my happy is as hollow as a pin-pricked egg.
 - my happy is as hollow as a pin-pricked egg. / my happy is a high fever that will break.
- Line 54: “i learnt it” vs. “i learnt the how”
- Line 57: “when i tell you” vs. “so when i tell you”
- Line 60: “my depression” vs. “but my depression”
- Line 70: “neither do i” vs. “that neither can i”

“WHEN THE FAT GIRL GETS SKINNY” – Blythe Baird

- Title of video: Blythe Baird - "When the Fat Girl Gets Skinny"
- Line 4: “collarbones” vs. “thigh gaps”
- Lines 83-84
 - “I used to take pride in being able to feel / cold in a warm room”
 - “I used to be cold, I used to be proud when I was cold in a warm room”

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