

Astrid Swan/Joutseno

ORCID: 0000-0003-1942-8907

University of Turku, Finland

Oxford Centre for Life-Writing

University of Oxford, United Kingdom

[astrid.joutseno@helsinki.fi](mailto:astrid.joutseno@helsinki.fi)

[astrid.joutseno@utu.fi](mailto:astrid.joutseno@utu.fi)

## Fiction at the Root of My Existence\*

**Abstract:** In this essay I examine abuse narratives and their impact on narrating my life. The essay is set in the USA, mostly in Los Angeles, of the early 2000s. I focus on the time when I travelled with my then manager in search for music business contacts and the following year promoting my first album, *Poverina* (2007). The music business itself, as well as the city, evoked disassociation from reality, from places and events. Simultaneously, I describe the impact of a lack of language around abuse and the pre-emptive liberalism of consumer-focused culture in which I, a young songwriter, became an impossible object. The essay examines narrative transformation over time. Considering tellability, interpretation, as well as the unforeseen unfolding of life.

**Keywords:** life-writing, essay, abuse, trauma, artist narrative, narrative transformation, becoming narrative

### I. The manager

Anything can rise from the ashes of no story. Tapping roots into what could be in hope as much as horror becomes the origins of artists from impoverished and violent, underprivileged and unacknowledged backgrounds. In the documentary *Moonage Daydream* (2022)—David Bowie rode in the back of a black limo in LA. A faceless interviewer accused him of being false—for hiding behind personas and characters. Bowie giggled from under his toffee-coloured fedora. Of course, America was going to rub off on him, like he was rubbing off on America. There was nothing to be grasped at the origin. Not in LA and not in his story of life. The basis for

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David Bowie's art is its fictionalized origins. The damage of dissociation becomes his insistence: *everything is transient*.

As a child, I was asked to believe the stories my parent told me. I was asked to show good will and to give them yet another chance. It was not said in words, but in gestures that persisted in the face of disaster. I pretended to believe. My childhood was good practice for Hollywood.

Something is muffled by the glittering lights, the hillside, and the warm California breeze in springtime Los Angeles. I have felt it sitting in a car driving up toward La Cienega Boulevard while my manager tried to convince me that everyone was stupid. The manager was English. This, and the fact that he was much older than me, made him a wise man. He was one of those guys that kept disappearing without a trace, offering no explanations but spun up some elaborate plan for my future of stardom and fame.

I came from an ugly suburban apartment building located near the westernmost border with the USSR. The reason I ever saw *The Wizard of Oz*, the film, as a child, was due to a lucky break while visiting a friend. I was not allowed to watch TV at home. Anyhow, now I was, sitting in a traffic jam in LA. I had found the yellow brick road.

The manager wavered between offering nothing and dangling *everything* in front of my starry eyes. His quick weather changes were nothing I couldn't get used to. He insinuated that everyone we ran into was below us, while we were the ones forever getting the joke that was on them. It is difficult to believe that anything sinister could happen under the sun of Los Angeles.

## II. Best Western

I have watched the sun set from a Best Western near the LAX airport, where we stayed for two nights before moving to a better location. When the sun isn't up high, there is a shade of pink or coral over the valley. That's when the sun falls behind ugly office buildings, hangars, and storage cubes. A sudden disappearance. On the flight from Austin, I read *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler while sitting next to my manager. He alternated between deeply sexist comments, sarcasm, and hostility. In the early 2000s, there were no alternatives. The plane flew through a thunderstorm that rocked me into a submissive indifference, *whatever happens*. LA was an afterlife.

There were pancakes for breakfast. Big scoops of ice cream and pools of maple syrup. But the curtains were the wrong shade of yellow, and the carpet could not be examined. I had my own room across the hall from his. I had to bide my time while the manager worked. Hours disappeared. He was not ready for dinner at the agreed time, so he asked me to wait in his room. I agreed. I sat on his bed while he was having a shower. I was wearing a low-cut black dress with tiny polka dots. Suddenly his laptop went on. "You're beautiful, it's true", James Blunt sang to me

on a queen bed in a windowless room. Emerging from his shower, the manager laughed with embarrassment. He was fully dressed and ready to go. The song was already known as the worst song ever. Fear was caged in a tiny iron box inside my spine. Feeling it would be impolite. It would be the worst thing I could do.

The manager and I were introduced by my boyfriend. The thing these men had going for them was that they were not Finnish. Let me explain: I am from Finland. Being from Finland is like being born at a dead-end road, in the last house without access to the road, only back paths and dirt roads to who-knows-where. You get out however you can. And if your direction is West, an English manager is much better than no manager at all. A recommendation from my boyfriend was key.

I was eager to please. To avoid conflict, I moulded my wishes and opinions based on what I thought I should feel. Much later I found out this was typical for a child of an alcoholic. It was also a typical survival technique for women. Once, as a teenager, when I told someone I wrote songs, they said “I hope you are not like Tori Amos or Fiona Apple”. I went to find out who they were. I loved them, but dyed my red hair blond. Songwriting made me a threat. To alleviate the tension, I tried to cultivate a pleasing mutability and an agreeable silence. It didn’t come naturally.

In Los Angeles I was searching for my star, a latter-day Emily Byrd Starr. I sat happily in the small space of my hotel room imagining what I was surrounded by. The manager kept vanishing. I did not demand explanations, itineraries, plans, or updates. I took what I was given. Alone, I felt enraged by the unavailability of the manager, but the moment he appeared it seemed ridiculous to have such strong feelings. I was not only a songwriter, but also a master’s degree student finalizing my studies. My suitcase was full of articles and books. I knew a lot about inequality and about discrimination. In theory. Yet in the music business, or in the City of Angels, I could not represent myself. Networks were everything and I had none. To get into the net, I had to swim like a fish and be caught by a fisherman.

### III. Sunset

For the nights of my shows, we stayed at a nicer hotel on Sunset. It was supposed to impress—make me feel appreciated. Four stars, yellow stucco, and a swimming pool. In the mornings I sat alone and enjoyed endless cups of coffee. I may have been the only woman in Hollywood in 2006 eating full-fat yoghurt and granola with an appetite. I did well on the days when I was alone without the vampire. He had made it clear that he was doing me a favour. Being there was a gift I didn’t deserve. But LA knows how to court you. Wherever I went, my presence was acknowledged. I believed all compliments.

On the morning of my first show, I walked into a tanning salon down on Sunset. The windows advertised a cheap deal. The receptionist assumed I needed the screen-friendly tan. I didn’t correct her. I was there for the off-chance that we would

suddenly discover I was, in fact, one of the city's angels. It was the heyday of self-tanners and tanning booths. I was whiter than white, trying to hide the fact that I turned red in the sun. This made me Nicole Kidman, but I wanted to be Gisele Bundchen. I wanted to embrace the dreaminess and plasticity of LA. Later, when I met some genuine California girls, I realized they hailed from an entirely different aesthetic. By then I was orange.

The tanning booth was practically a shower. I was to turn once and stay still otherwise. I was handed a packet which included nostril plugs and some other protectives. One item was a Vaseline lip balm with a hemp leaf on the cover. In the dressing room, I forgot most of the instructions I had been given. I stripped down to my underpants and walked to the tanning booth with the protective plugs in my nose. I could hardly breathe. As if nose plugs could make you lose your balance. The shower started after I pressed a button, then I panicked and moved out of its way. No one came to help. The plugs flew out of my nose. Most of the tanning liquid fell straight to the floor. I regained my posture and stayed under the shower for the last side. The tanning liquid smelled like chemical bubble gum. I decided never to return. The result was blotchy. That evening, I hid my streaked limbs under a long black dress. My first show was at the Hotel Café on Cahuenga Boulevard. I didn't tell the audience about my LA experience.

#### IV. Astrid Snow

The second show was at a factory-like venue in Silverlake, opening for a pretty hot solo artist from Sweden. I remember a dangerous sense of dissolving somewhere around Silverlake when the manager and I were looking for a taco place before the show. I had no beginning or end. It felt like I was so far from home that our conversations with the manager could actually be truer than anything I felt. It seemed like my past could never be translated into a story fit for this climate. The lure of re-invention beckoned as much as it endangered me.

When I was invited to the stage, the presenter misread my name as Astrid Snow. The place was brimming with cool people, as if from my favourite TV series, the *L-Word*. I started by correcting my name. I was wearing a 1940s evening dress in copper, but my awkward comments about the mispronounced last name did not set the tone for endearment nor really for confrontation. I appeared insignificant and lost, the warm-up act. Disconnected even from my songs. It is never good if something is on your mind when performing. Therefore, I was no good. What ate at me was the need to convince someone. I could not settle for that. After my 30-minute set, I watched in amazement as the Swedish star mesmerized the audience with his nearly inaudible mumbling and sweet nylon-string guitar. He was not reaching. He simply resided in smallness, in himself. I couldn't believe it was enough. In the greenroom after his show, he smiled at me kindly. We shared

some red wine. Like a mother hen, his manager arranged and enthused around him. Mine stayed outside.

## V. Women don't sell

*Pretty Woman* is an entertaining movie with the amazing Julia Roberts. Somehow its sentiment on transactional relationships continued to ring true in 2006. Predators were prowling the city in broad daylight. Hungry for hurting young women, these beasts were gifted at telling the most elaborate untruths while charming their way in. Some of them had power, while others believed it would come to them. Harvey Weinstein was threatening and raping women just a few blocks from where I was staying. He said: "Choose between sex with me or your career ending". He made sure it was true. But he wasn't just one awful man in la-la land. It was taken as an unmentionable fact that gatekeepers would open doors to those who were available sexually or brimmed with the possibility of a relationship.

I wasn't the only blonde in skinny jeans. I was one in a million. Brittany Murphy's star was rapidly rising. She had driven through the gates of the studio lots as a successful adult, an unobvious feat for a child star. She hadn't yet met her future husband. Yet, by the age of thirty-two she would be dead. The contributing factors are ugly, no matter how they are arranged.

As the daughter of a violent alcoholic, I too was an ideal target. As I see it now, there was a deliberate attempt to break me, to convey how amazingly average I was. This was executed via repeated abandonment and weak commitment. I was supposed to doubt everything and everyone so that I would not be able to go on. It may even have been just the inner workings of a depressive in the depths of a psychotic episode. But it was taken out on me.

The manager was not evil personified, but he was passive-aggressive and prone to fabrication. He was a manipulator. His hatred for women and his utter disappointment was tugged inside an act that said otherwise: he presented himself as a listener and a connector.

Years later, through the grapevine, I received confirmation that during my time with the manager, he had multiple relationships with women on the fringes and in the music industry. He collected their confidences. He was loved by some and the tormentor of others. In my time with him, he wanted me to know about his secret affairs, spilling the beans in asides gushing out as if by accident. I don't know if these stories were supposed to make me trust him or doubt him. His confessions were a warning. They aligned with the secrets I had held for my parent.

Slowly I learned I was in the company of a frustrated pianist and a hopeless romantic who would rather be a cynic. I was dealing with a broken little boy, who hid his softness by hurting others, and who—for some reason—wanted to aid naïve Finns realize their pop dreams while chuckling at them.

In 2007, after five years of associating with the manager, I got to release my debut album in the USA. That is when he told me what the trouble was: “women don’t sell”.

I realized he hated me. Maybe it was envy.

We parted ways and I returned to America alone. It was the year of Amy Winehouse’s *Back to Black*.

## VI. Respite

When darkness settles in the Central Valley, from the roots of the Hollywood hills the air becomes velvet. At twenty-five, I lived for two weeks in Beachwood, just around the corner from where Brittany Murphy was nesting with her man. I was back alone on an album release tour. I stayed with a kind actress. This time Los Angeles wasn’t just a riddle of sunsets, but a friendship between two creative women. It was a showbusiness love-affair: for two weeks we did everything together. She accompanied me to the stage even, playing saw on a couple of my songs when I performed. I followed her to her shows, recording studios, and meetings.

On one of our daily walks, an old man told me I looked like Laura Dern. Everywhere we went, someone had something complimentary to say. Mostly about the actress. People were drawn to her fluttering beauty, which was not particularly flashy or arranged. It just was. In her company, I tasted coconut ice cream, hiked in the hills, and dreamed of having a baby and surviving an earthquake. I read Sylvia Plath in Malibu and ate avocado toast in Topanga Canyon. Eating mozzarella and tomato arranged by a famous child star at his home, I mentioned that I preferred New York to LA.

One night we drove down to a video store to rent a movie. We watched *The Red Shoes* directed by Powell and Pressburger (1948). It is a story within a story about a woman trying to make art in the confines defined by men.

For those two weeks I belonged. I had an album to promote. I went to Amoeba Music and saw my record on the shelf. I did interviews discussing my songs before they were played on air. One night driving in the huge van of the pixie-sized actress we were stopped in traffic next to the Elliott Smith *Figure 8* mural. This was where he died, in a city where it was easy to be lost, to become entirely fictional. Now I was stitching myself to the same geography. I never mentioned the manager. She didn’t mention she was pregnant. I did not speak of the trauma I was carrying. Each night, the sky studded with planets, airplanes, and satellites draped over us. There, among the howling coyotes and rattling snakes, the lemons and oranges hanging from the tree branches, I watched with delight over the city built on the dreams of those who narrowly escaped. I ached for home and slowly began to make my way there.

## VII. Chicago echo

In Chicago I found myself in the unflattering situation of not bringing in the glamour I was expected to travel with. For the next two weeks I idled at the record label's offices. Being my own manager now, I fired off emails, looking for an agent to book me more shows. In the evenings I sat on the steps of the residential house that functioned as the label offices and as my hotel. Others had gone home. I smoked American Spirits. Magnolias bloomed in the otherwise barren spring. Sometimes snow fell from the sky. Chicago reminded me of home. Some nights I walked a few blocks to a club to watch bands on tour. I waited until the last song and handed them my CDs. I yearned for the company of musicians. One night I shook the warm hand of Richard Swift. I knew I needed to be more disastrous, like Amy Winehouse, but I was disastrous in a boring way.

On the night of my record release show in the Windy City, I played to a crowd of five to ten people. The label personnel had bundled into a booth at the near-empty club. After my show, a woman approached me. She had flown in from NYC just to see me. I thought it was a joke. She said she was friends with my ex-manager. I did not know what to think. This confident redhead in black leather might be in love with the man who made my stomach turn. Or was she really in love with me? I tried to take her presence as a compliment—I had a fan. Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that I might owe her something. I was clueless, that much was obvious. The label representatives made it clear that I was a liability sleeping in their office. They paid me to babysit their kids on a night off. They would not take no for an answer. For Easter I took a train to Ann Arbor. Then I played shows in Minneapolis and finally in New York before heading home.

## VIII. Dream killer

In 2009, at thirty-two, Brittany Murphy was dead. Killed by intentional neglect. I was in Finland, graduated from the University of Helsinki, touring a new album. I vowed never to work with a manager again. I was first averted and then stunted. In this sense, the manager got what he wanted. I grew frightened, scrambling for protection. I wanted nothing to do with the entertainment business. They didn't want much of me either. Yet, I yearned for the community of art. I put out albums in rapid succession. I looked for companionship in my band, in touring Europe, in writing, and in recording. I looked for it in arrangements that put me at the helm. Even though I didn't always know where I wanted to go.

When there are no functioning definitions, it is nearly impossible to recognize abuse.

In my 20s, I was sexually harassed by my driving instructor, it went on for six months. I was afraid to make a complaint because he spoke disparagingly of others

who reported him. *He was a family man*. Similarly, I did nothing when a guitar player of a band groped me. I did not call anything out. Sexist and racist talk was normal in my surroundings, and even though it hurt, I mostly said nothing. I was afraid. I just laughed because that was how I brushed it off. As if it didn't even happen. Like I didn't even exist. As if those who were offensive, were not. Maybe I heard wrong. *Just be easy-going, don't be difficult, don't be angry*.

Whenever I was a victim of harassment or violence, I worried about what my boyfriend would say. I thought he might be angry. Not at the perpetrators, but me. I told myself that it wasn't bad, because none of it was rape. I thought complaining would make me impossible to work with. Impossible to love. *I had been impossible to work with because I had a boyfriend*. My songs bore the ripples of these events and the scars they left. Music was the only place where I allowed myself to express the pain. But I said it in a fashion that was deciphered only by those who recognized the experiences. It was easy to dismiss.

## IX. 32

In the seven years I spent in therapy, I never spoke about the manager. He didn't come up. I buried the story in the communal cellar, where women have been burying shit for centuries. I wanted to focus on *the real trauma*, the injuries from my childhood. Isn't that what good girls do in therapy? Still, whenever I remembered the manager, I shuddered. So, I avoided remembering or crediting memories with narratives. I retreated from aspirations of stardom.

It is true that I wasn't a victim of just one person. It is true that I don't like to identify my abusers. I am still not willing to go there. I inherited generational wounds. I learned to make excuses, to be silenced by the lineage that caused the problematic behaviour. Parental wounds led to children's trauma and so on for centuries. Every facet of the social structure, from the privacy of homes to the publics of educational spaces, workplaces, healthcare, and the law, was set up to signal that it was troubling to speak up when someone hurt me. Even my academic education in gender studies could not break the silence just yet. In the culture of the 2000s and well into the 2010s feminism was a past thing, something we already finished. Men were especially suspicious that I might be wasting my time studying in general. In conversation, I was often ashamed to mention what I studied. Another dead-end choice.

At thirty-two, in 2014, I fell ill with aggressive breast cancer. I wasn't in Hollywood. I was a mother living in a rent-controlled apartment in my hometown. I was just beginning my PhD research. My child was turning two. In this messy place I discovered that all it took to grow roots was to stay still long enough to touch the ground. To stay in one place as the roots found their way in the nourishment of the darkness. Illness became a constant companion. My roots grew in the



soil of uncertainty. Little by little, I discovered the urgency of being alive. I wrote songs from the broken place. I continued to research and to mother. I spoke without embellishment. My cancer became metastatic the same year I wrote #metoo in a social media update. Since then, I have lived with all possible endings in mind. I have written through memories and experiences, and through the nourishment of fiction. The blurry edges of what I recall and how I choose to tell it.

## X. Snowflake

It was the 1980s. A teacher pulled me aside in November and confidentially asked if I might like a special role in the upcoming Christmas performance at my day-care. I was asked to dance on stage in a snowflake costume. I would enter the stage in a white tutu and white woollen tights, alone. I would improvise a dance to classical music, dance as if snow falling from the sky. I would be the one who signals to the others to come and join me. I felt almost sick with excitement. I knew I could do it.