

**The Body as Evidence: Natasha Trethewey's "What Is Evidence"**

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Poetry can do what institutions cannot: hold pain with precision, refuse to let suffering dissolve into bureaucratic silence. In “What Is Evidence,” Natasha Trethewey confronts systems that claim to protect domestic abuse victims yet disregard the body's most crucial evidence: its physical injuries and its invisible, emotional wounds. Trethewey's own life has been shaped by grief and systemic neglect, and she writes as an advocate, using the tools of literary craft to make apparent what the processes meant to protect domestic abuse victims repeatedly choose to trivialize, even after seeing the physical evidence. She contends that society has engineered systems of protection so narrowly and carelessly that they inherently disregard the very women they claim to serve. Trethewey deploys assonance to record the trauma these systems cannot hear, anaphora to mirror the reflexive dismissal built into their design, and enjambment to offer the solidarity that no institution has been structured to provide.

To read the poem on its own terms, then, is to recognize what the system refuses to: the body itself as a record of abuse. Trethewey makes visible that the systems society designed to protect women from domestic abuse were never built to take that evidence seriously. The actions taken against these women are supposed to be punished, yet instead are documented and forgotten; the paper trail (the police report, the court filings, the medical records, receipts for medical expenses) is neglected. Trethewey contends that these forms of evidence ultimately make no difference, averring,

Not the teeth she wore in place of her own, or  
the official document—its seal  
and smeared signature—fading already,  
the edges wearing. (lines 6–10)

These official documents, ones handled with a lack of care indicated by the smeared signature, display signs of neglect: the signatures are fading, and their edges are worn. This neglect undermines the weight of the evidence and perpetuates a cycle of invisibility and silence around the victim's struggles. It is a metaphor for the erasure of their voices and stories. Instead of being validated and supported, these women find themselves trapped in a system that society has conditioned to have a Semmelweis reflex. She describes these documents as "abstract as history," establishing that these systems, meant to protect, only exist in theory (line 11). The institutions are not performing their intended actions, failing because society built them that way.

The poem opens with "Not," inviting the reader to challenge their understanding of what can count as evidence. Trethewey mirrors it through anaphora. She deliberately repeats the "Not" as the start of successive sentences to illustrate the reflexive minimization society has structured into the system's response to the victim's experience. Their injuries are witnessed, yet they do not count as evidence. "Not the fleeting bruises..." begins the first line, acknowledging the domestic abuse injuries immediately (line 1). However, the anaphora of "not" demonstrates that the injury's existence and documentation do not matter. Society's system does *not* weigh testimony; it forecloses it. The anaphora continues in lines six and seven, where "Not / the teeth..." extends the pattern, compounding the sense of a cover-up in real time (lines 6-7). Whatever evidence the body offers, whether it is revealing broken teeth and bruising, the systemic response is preemptive refusal. The most devastating implication of Trethewey's use of "not" is its effect on the only evidence the system will accept: victim testimonials. Yet, this evidence, the victim's word alone, is unaided and unwitnessed, and thus is consistently found inconclusive. The breakage of the anaphora later in the poem ("Only the landscape of her body...") is itself significant (line 12). Here, Trethewey depicts that these damages are real and the pain lingers far

beyond the moment of abuse, despite society's normalization of abuse, encoded into the system's very definitions of what counts as harm in a marriage.

Beyond the dismissal, Trethewey embeds in the poem's very sound a record of what the system and society refuse to see, hear, and acknowledge. She incorporates the repetition of the long e (/i:/) and long oo (/u:/) sounds throughout the poem to convey the screams of the victim and, by proxy, the abuse that haunts her. The use of these sounds is apparent from the poem's first three lines, where the /i:/ sound appears in "fleeting" and "she'ed" in line one, "leaning" in line five, "teeth," "sear," and "smeared" in lines seven, eight, and nine respectively, and "history" in line eleven (lines 7-9, 11). The /i:/ sound enacts the repeated abuse constantly impacting the victim, appearing in every sentence and thought, representing the depth of trauma being inflicted. The repetition of sounds continues, with the next prominent sound being the /u:/ sound that appears in line three's "too" and "to," and line eight's "docuument," indicating multiple instances of abuse (lines 3, 8). This repeated sound illustrates the constant trauma that haunts the victim; only they can know it and understand it, while the system was never structured by society to receive it. In the poem's final sentence, which describes how "Only the landscape of her body—splintered / clavicle, pieruced temporal—her thin bones / settling a bit each day, the way all things udo," Trethewey establishes the /i:/ and /u:/ sounds once more in the sentence that opens her description of post-abuse injuries (lines 12-14). She thereby reveals that the injuries persist long after the moment of abuse.

It is in Trethewey's use of enjambment, however, that the poem's most human gesture emerges. Where anaphora and sound repetition build the case against our failures, enjambment becomes the poem's act of solidarity. Trethewey uses enjambment to pull the reader forward without resolution, denying them the closure that the victim is also denied, forcing the reader to

enact rather than merely observe the experience of surviving abuse, where no single moment is final, and the body keeps speaking through its bruises even when institutions were never built to listen. The lines push forward, refuse to settle, and refuse to conclude neatly. No statement is complete in itself; each carries the weight of what comes next. This intentional choice mirrors the experience of surviving abuse, specifically the sense that no single moment of recovery is the end. When Trethewey writes of “a dark patch like the imprint / of a scope she'd pressed her eye too close to, / looking for a way out,” the enjambment suspends the phrases mid-breath, holding the reader in the same uncertainty the victim inhabits (lines 2-4). The line does not resolve. Neither does the pain. Instead, its meaning depends on what follows, just as survival depends on continuing, day after day. The line is also deliberately ambiguous through its enjambment; it could mean escape from the relationship, escape from the violence, or even an escape from life. And in lines twelve through fourteen, the use of enjambment mimics the physical landscape of the survivor's body so that each break delays completion and forces the reader to move through the injuries piece by piece, enacting how trauma unfolds over time (lines 12-14). The poem, with empathy built between reader and subject through enjambment, unequivocally refuses abandonment, carrying each line forward rather than allowing it to end in isolation. The poem is still there, still holding the lines with her.

“What Is Evidence” is remarkable not just for the message but also for the precision with which Trethewey fuses form to content. Each device she deploys does double work. The “not” is both a repeated negation and institutional silence; the /i:/ and /u:/ are both sonic textures and records of the cries that don't get to be heard; the enjambment is both a poetic property and a philosophy of survival. Trethewey is, in this sense, assembling in the space of a poem what does not matter when gathered in a case file.

A police report can catalog injuries; a poem can make you feel the weight of each bone settling. A court record can document evidence; a poem can indict the system that rejected it. Natasha Trethewey's "What Is Evidence" is an exemplary demonstration of this phenomenon. It combines anaphora, assonance, and enjambment to portray, reflect, and advocate. The poem *insists* that the body is always evidence, whether or not these institutions have been designed to see it. The poem does not let you merely observe and move on, as the institutions meant to protect survivors do. Rather, it pulls you into the body. You feel the bones settle.

**Works Cited**

Trethewey, Natasha. "What Is Evidence." *Native Guard*, First Mariner Books, 2007, p. 11.