Introduction

"cleave" is a lyric essay in seven sections exploring the trajectory of an abusive relationship. It is written primarily in the form of a second-person address to the speaker's abuser, though a secondary conversation takes place in the footnotes between the speaker and her second self, a burlesque persona called Dinah Taitkov. Dinah's observations weave in and out of the text to reveal insights that the speaker may tacitly understand, but that she does not allow to surface until she is far enough enmeshed in a violent relationship that she is unsure how to escape.

The speaker of the piece and Dinah share an interest in horror films, but it is only Dinah, initially, who sees the distinct relationship between domestic violence and the horror genre. Both burlesque and horror bring to the forefront of their audience's minds the subjects that are often considered too taboo for discussion in polite company: violence, sex, and the body. Sex, sexuality, and the body are prominent focuses of the horror film — the connection between sex and violence, particularly the sexualized violence of the horror film, is undeniable. Bodies and spirits are broken through violence in both the horror film and in real life situations of domestic violence. The body, in burlesque, is often a site of reclamation. Carol Clover's famous concept of the "final girl" posits that the woman who escapes and survives the horror film is most often chaste, pure, virginal. "cleave" attempts to disrupt this trope, as it is the reconciliation of Dinah and the speaker into a cohesive identity — the rediscovery and ownership of the speaker's sexuality through Dinah — that ultimately allow her to escape the relationship and survive.

The essay is an experiment in form, which contains many footnotes. I will read the footnotes where they are appropriate to the text, so don't be alarmed. The piece is long, so I will only be reading some excerpts and will provide some notes for context where necessary.

1. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us so, because it serenely disdains to destroy us.
   — Rainer Maria Rilke

The music starts:
   raucous, loud, and shouting.

The house lights come up
   to spotlight my mother's retro floor-length duster,
   a gift from my father in their early days of dating,
   fur-lined and blue,
   covering Dinah Taitkov from aqua hair
down to her azure go-go boots.
It's snowing!

Desperate to dive in, Dinah tears off a glove
fingertip by fingertip
with her teeth
before flinging the other one away

unbuttoning
endlessly

to reveal a corset that shimmers silver;
tiny skirt that sparkles cobalt sequins.

She strips off a boa of glitter and light;
the snow dance continues as she scoops handfuls to throw
at the audience; spreads it on her skin —
unsatisfied, she removes her corset
to reveal silver snowflakes on each breast
before one final bump & grind
&departing the burlesque.

— Dinah, where have you come from?

I get naked: -SLIDE 5

off stage,
in the dressing room,
with the women who have,
through just six days together,
learning to sway and shimmy,
become my glitter-stripper-sisters,

the threads of Dinah's journey
unravel from me.

You know that I have always been here. I was wounded the last two years — badly enough that I thought I might disappear.