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Speaking through Silence: Communicating Trauma through Metaphorical Imagery in Una's "Becoming Unbecoming"

Nicole Szklarczyk

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Speaking through Silence: Communicating Trauma through Metaphorical Imagery in
Una's *Becoming Unbecoming*

In Una's *Becoming Unbecoming*, Una recounts her personal experiences of sexual assault and connects them to the collective experience of victims by referring to statistics surrounding rape. She further uses the Yorkshire Ripper murders as a case study to evaluate the victim-blaming culture engrained in societal institutions. The objective statistics and analyses of collective cases are interesting and enlighten audiences on social issues surrounding rape culture. While the objective information itself is quite clear, Una's experiences of sexual trauma are represented as elusive, largely due to the silence attributed to her intra-diegetic narrator. The silence of the intra-diegetic Una brings the artistic renderings of her subjective reality into the forefront of the graphic memoir. Her imagery is largely informed by her sexual trauma which visually conveys the emotional distress that cannot be communicated by the young Una. These images, better defined as metaphorical imagery, emerge to fill the gaps of silence between the intra- and extra-diegetic Una in the form of landscapes, bodily distortions, and intertextual allusions – all of which become indicative of her interior landscape and representative of her traumatic experiences. While these images epitomize the intra-diegetic Una's emotional turmoil and trauma, they also transform at the end of the graphic memoir to frame a survivor's narrative of liberation.

Akin to other graphic memoirs, Una's *Becoming Unbecoming* focuses on personal trauma. Una delineates her experiences of sexual abuse as a child and the subsequent public degradation, ostracization, and psychological trauma she suffered. Cathy Caruth, a trauma theory scholar, describes trauma as a wound upon the mind that is less "healable" than a wound on the body (*Unclaimed Experience* 3). Furthermore, Caruth notes the fragmentary nature of traumatic

memory, stating that psychological trauma “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again...” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3-4). Traumatic memory inevitably contains gaps; however, Caruth argues that a variety of disciplines are incorporating trauma theory and “are listening to the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience” (*Trauma Exploration* 4). This is inclusive of literature, which can aid in the process of communicating trauma. Comics scholar Hillary Chute suggests that the innovative form of graphic narrative combines the visual and verbal form and alters representations of trauma in a way that prompts the audience “to rethink the dominant tropes of unspeakability, invisibility, and inaudibility that have tended to characterize trauma theory” (3). Graphic narratives have the potential to resolve gaps in traumatic memory and communicate what is ‘unspeakable’ with their ability to visually illustrate trauma in often unconventional ways. In *Becoming Unbecoming*, one of the ways in which Una communicates her ineffable trauma is through the distinctive roles of her visually illustrated intra- and extra-diegetic narrators.

Conventional intra- and extra-diegetic narrators offer audiences the perspective of an experiencing (intra-diegetic) narrator that resides in and accounts for the story world and a retrospective (extra-diegetic) narrator that’s purpose is to clarify experiences, emotions, and gaps in the narrative. In graphic memoirs, both of these narrators are the same person, but existing in different temporalities. Together, these narrators offer readers a comprehensive narrative that includes the perspective of the narrator at the time the story is taking place, as well as their retrospective commentary. However, in *Becoming Unbecoming*, the roles of the narrators are subverted as the intra-diegetic Una remains entirely silent throughout the memoir while the role of the extra-diegetic Una is to “explain the contexts that impacted [] her life as well as to make

sense of a traumatic experience – rape and sexual abuse” (Appleton and Mallan 51). The extra-diegetic Una often elucidates events and the mental interiority of the intra-diegetic Una – although many details of the intra-diegetic Una’s emotional turmoil remain ambiguous. Ultimately, the intra-diegetic Una does not vocalize her trauma within the temporality of the story world, and the extra-diegetic Una often only offers limited access. David Small’s *Stitches* narrator functions in a similar way; his intra-diegetic narrator cannot and does not have the opportunity to speak; however, Jennifer Daniels Klug argues that “Small uses his limited language to show us the way he didn’t have access to language or being heard” (Klug), but he simultaneously “uses art to show us that he was unseen and unheard” (Klug). Comparably, the intra-diegetic Una’s absence of voice in the text is a deliberate strategy that is reflective of the silence she endured as a child. In addition, Una uses visual structures to convey her narrator’s silence. Una illustrates the silence of her intra-diegetic narrator in the visual representation of empty speech bubbles, which are contrasted with the speech bubbles that include the extra-diegetic Una’s commentary.

The adult, extra-diegetic Una oftentimes employs speech bubbles when narrating, while the young Una is portrayed as carrying empty speech bubbles (Figure 1). The depiction of young Una bearing empty speech bubbles is representative of “her inability to speak or be heard” (Appleton and Mallan 59) as a young victim of sexual abuse. Moreover, the illustrations of Una dragging these empty speech bubbles and struggling to move forward is emblematic of “the burden of her silent, unexpressed anxieties” (Appleton and Mallan 51) and unspoken trauma. These representations of empty speech bubbles paradoxically vocalize the young Una’s silence and are an example of the way “a visual structure” can make “silence perceptible in a way that written words, alone, by definition, cannot” (Muller qtd. in Klug). Throughout her memoir, Una



Figure 1: Una struggling to carry an empty speech bubble (Una 7).¹

frequently uses visual structures that displace a verbal mode of expression. These visual structures are very abstract, and so can be understood as metaphorical imagery that imparts a narrative of the intra-diegetic Una's mental interiority, specifically with regards to her emotional and psychological trauma.

In her Afterword, Una discloses:

When I began drawing, I didn't plan to show the work to anyone, so it is odd to be sharing it with the world now. Many of the earliest drawings will forever remain private, but some of the early, quite abstract drawings are included here. They can be understood as functioning on a more unconscious, symbolic level than the more conventional narrative panels. I think they communicate something that words perhaps cannot. (205)

These abstract images to which Una refers "communicate something that words perhaps cannot" (Una 205) can be interpreted as metaphorical imagery. Nancy Pedri explores and analyzes metaphorical imagery in the realm of comics, paying specific attention to David B.'s *Epileptic*.

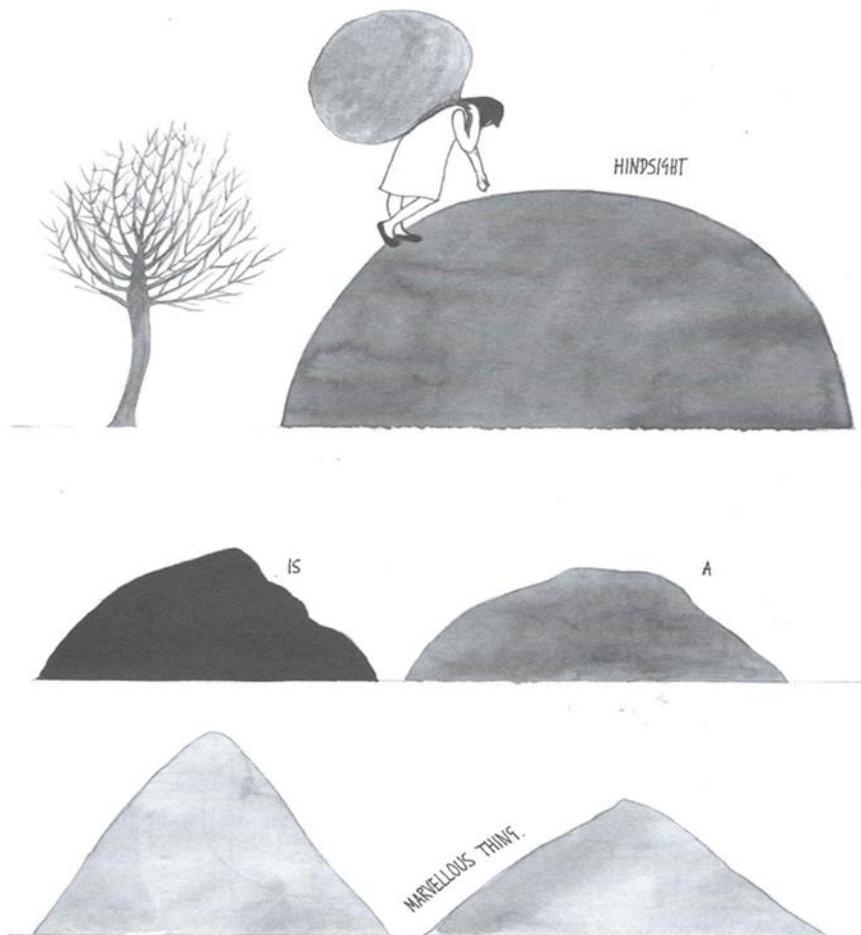
Metaphorical images “unite real world experience with interpretive distortion...” (Pedri 147) and draw readers further away from realism – leading them closer to the artist’s subjective reality (Pedri 146). Readers recognize metaphorical imagery to be “adequately expressive of the emotions and emotional responses as the memoirist/protagonist understands them to have been” (Pedri 146-147), rather than an authentic illustration of reality. Metaphorical images, then, are visual structures created by the artist that are a subjective and distortive rendering of their external world, often reflecting their psychological interiority.

In *Becoming Unbecoming*, Una utilizes a variety of metaphorical images to provide insight into the intra-diegetic Una’s mental interiority and compensate for the gaps in her silence. These metaphorical images speak for the silent intra-diegetic Una and emerge repeatedly throughout the text, similarly to the way that motifs are employed. The most prominent images include the bleak landscape of the “moorlands, hills and crags” (Appleton and Mallan 51), the bodily distortions that are imposed on Una’s intra-diegetic self, and the multitude of intertextual allusions invoked. Throughout the majority of the memoir, this imagery becomes representative of Una’s emotional and psychological traumas; however, the imagery ultimately shifts into a representation of a survivor’s narrative: one of liberation from the burdens of silence.

It is significant to consider the colours used to illustrate these metaphorical images and what they represent as the foundation of these images. In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud considers the importance of colour in comics: colour could “take on a central role / Colors could express a dominant mood / Tones and modeling could add depth. / Whole scenes could virtually be about color!” (190). McCloud also discusses the way in which the use of specific colours and backgrounds in graphic novels can indicate a character’s emotions and affect the audience’s “‘reading’ of characters’ inner states” (132).

Una employs a simplistic art style that primarily utilizes the colours black and white to create barren landscapes that establish the young Una's world as a subjective reality reflective of her emotional distress. By illustrating that the young Una occupies a bleak world composed of only black and white, Una conveys young Una's melancholic state resulting from her sexual trauma. Una also portrays a barren landscape characterized by hills and bare trees, which "potentially represent difficult situations or obstacles" (Appleton and Mallan 59). Una is often exhibited as trudging up insurmountable hills, and these depictions exemplify the way Una illustrates external obstacles to reflect psychological obstacles that she endures and act as an impediment to the development of her personal identity (Figure 2).

Figure 2: An example of the landscapes in *Becoming Unbecoming* (Una 46).



The landscapes also include bare, black trees that specify a lifelessness in the external environment and stagnation in personal growth (Figures 3 & 4). Trees with abundant leaves commonly symbolize life and growth, but the bare trees in *Becoming Unbecoming* contribute to the desolate environment that Una inhabits and indicate the stasis that young Una encounters in her personal development.



Figures 3 & 4: Illustrations of the bare trees that occupy the landscapes (Una 75, 47).

Among the images of black and white are marks of red that become a symbol of female promiscuity and perversion. In *Becoming Unbecoming*, the colour red is primarily applied to clothing, the most prominent article being young Una's dress, which is initially coloured red immediately following her first account of sexual assault (Figure 5). The motif of red clothing evokes narratives of female literary characters who have worn red as a symbol of sexual promiscuity. Most notably, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* centralizes on Hester Prynne, who is publicly ostracized and differentiated as an adulteress with the scarlet red letter

“A” that is sewn on her clothing. Una loosely compares her intra-diegetic self to Hester as she reports having been shunned by society and indicates ostracization as a “not uncommon” thing “after experiencing sexualised violence” (107). In addition to experiencing the same public persecution as Hester, Una portrays her identification with the colour red and its sexual implications because of the frequency of which her dress is pictured in red. In using the colour red as the only distinctive colour in the memoir, Una invokes its associative connotations to visually communicate the perverseness she felt as a child.

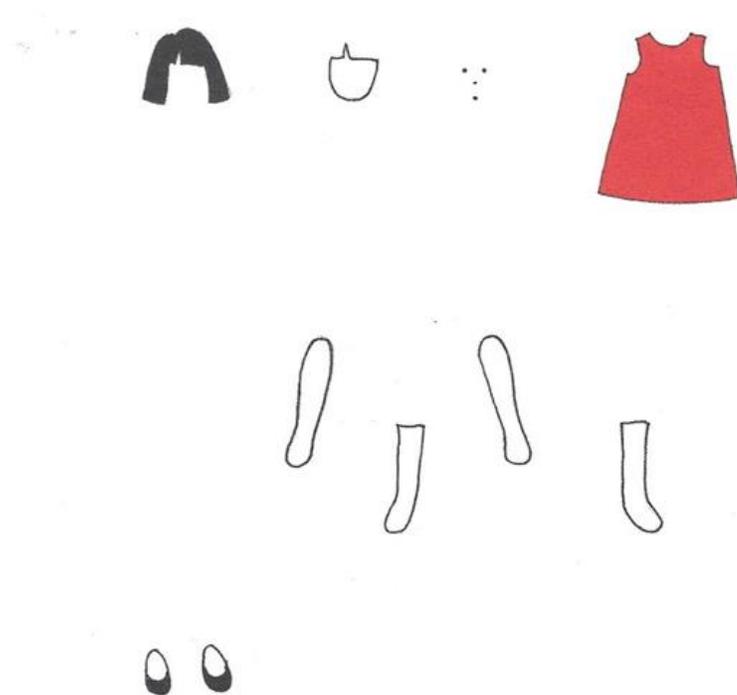
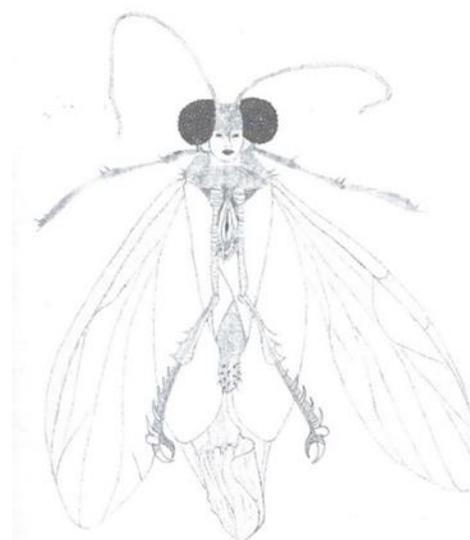


Figure 5: A representation of a fragmented Una (Una 39).

In addition to using colour and landscapes to characterize an emotional or psychological state, Una also embodies her intra-diegetic self in a distortive way. As previously described, “the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth *Unclaimed Experience* 3). However, to ensure her emotional and psychological trauma could be universally understood and perceptible to readers, Una uses the technique of adding metaphorical bodily distortions. One of the earliest examples illustrates young Una in pieces (Figure 5); exhibiting the notion that her identity has been fractured and fragmented following her sexual abuse. Furthermore, another recurring bodily distortion is that of the intra-diegetic Una as an insect (Figures 6 & 7).



MY BODY WAS CHANGING



MY WINGS DIDNT SEEM TO WORK VERY WELL. PERHAPS THEY WERE JUST DECORATIVE?

Figures 6 & 7: Young Una illustrated as an insect (Una 40-41).

Following her first account of sexual assault, Una states “My body was changing. My wings didn’t seem to work very well. Perhaps they were just decorative?” (40-41). Here, Una reveals her young self’s sense of alienation from her body by representing it as a foreign and monstrous creature. Una introduces the motif of dysfunctional wings to further articulate a disconnect between herself and her body, as she is unable to use them to fly, but instead, claims she finds herself “hovering anxiously mid-air much of the time” (52). Furthermore, her wings are often represented as dragging on the ground (Figure 8), remaining unused and unfamiliar to her.

Courtney Donovan and Ebru Ustundag argue that these “visual depictions of [Una’s] personal metamorphosis capture invisibilized traumatic experiences that leave a lasting effect, and may be difficult to articulate in words” (231). Una physically embodies the “invisibilized” psychological trauma on young Una’s body using the recurrent motif of insect wings to demonstrate the way that psychological trauma is ever-present despite the fact that it cannot always be seen on the physical body.



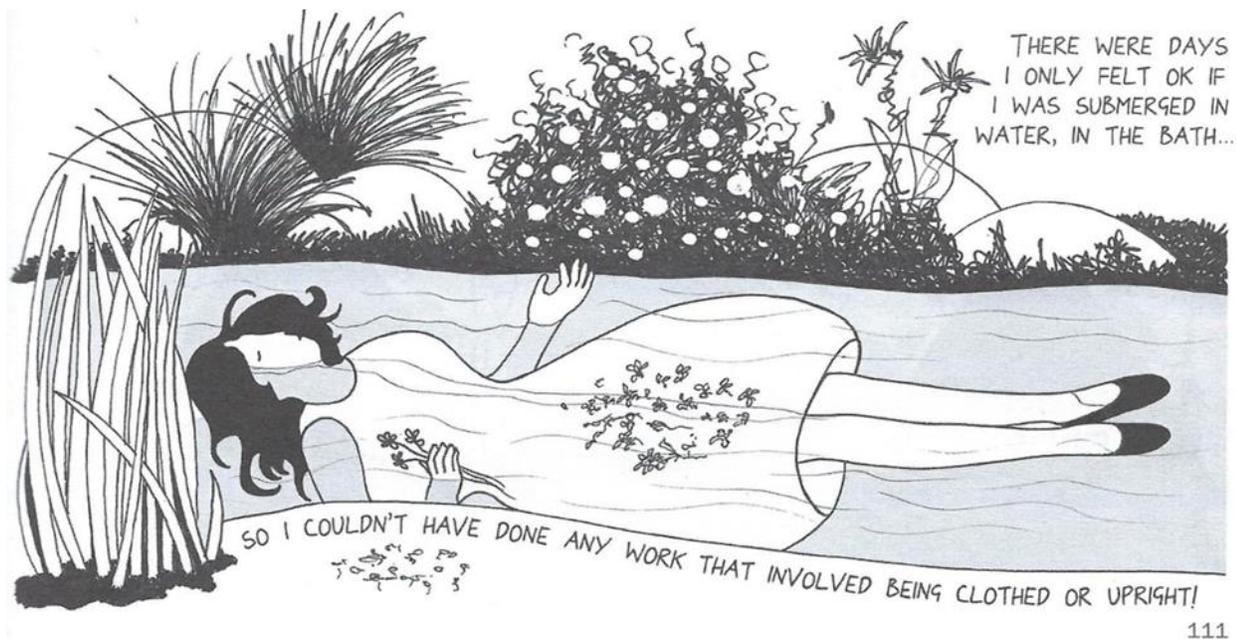
Figure 8: Una’s wings dragging behind her (Una 93).

Una also uses intertextual allusions in *Becoming Unbecoming* to clarify her trauma in a way that is more universally comprehensible. As previously mentioned, Cathy Caruth suggests an important connection between literature and trauma theory in that literature has the potential to bring together the fragments of traumatic memory (*Trauma Exploration* 4). In her work, *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative and History*, Caruth argues that there is a “knowing” and “not knowing” in traumatic memory and that “it is [] at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (10). In addition, “knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it” (Caruth *Unclaimed Experience* 4). In the sites where trauma is present but ineffable, literature can be introduced to clarify and bring together the fragments of traumatic memory. Una uses the visual component of the graphic novel to illustrate intertextual allusions by drawing herself as other female literary figures and invoking their stories to incorporate into her own personal telling of trauma.

One of the literary allusions that Una reproduces to supplement the gaps in her trauma narrative is that of the character Ophelia from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, specifically her portrayal in Sir John Everett Millais’s painting, *Ophelia*. In Una’s recreation of this painting, she illustrates her intra-diegetic narrator as the drowning Ophelia to implicitly convey her suicidal thoughts and tendencies that are a result of her trauma (Figure 9). Una does not explicitly communicate her suicidal thoughts; she refers only to the emotional and psychological damage that she suffers:

There were many wasted days...unable to focus...or to stay calm...small inconveniences left me beside myself with frustration and despair. Between times I functioned well enough to keep plodding on, one foot in front of the other. [‘]The next train does not stop

Figure 9: The intra-diegetic Una depicted as the drowning Ophelia (Una 111).



at this station, please stand back from the platform[']...But occasionally I'd find myself standing on the edge of the platform, thinking. (111)

Una alludes to her suicidal tendencies and thoughts, but her characterization of the intra-diegetic Una as Ophelia drowning reinforces this idea without verbally communicating it. The literary allusion offers a clearer glimpse into the intra-diegetic Una's interiority and supplements her personal narrative of trauma.

Towards the end of the graphic novel, Una expresses the violence that she desires to enact on one of her perpetrators by referring to a story from the Book of Judith. Una depicts the young Una dressing up as Judith and pretending to be her while narrating:

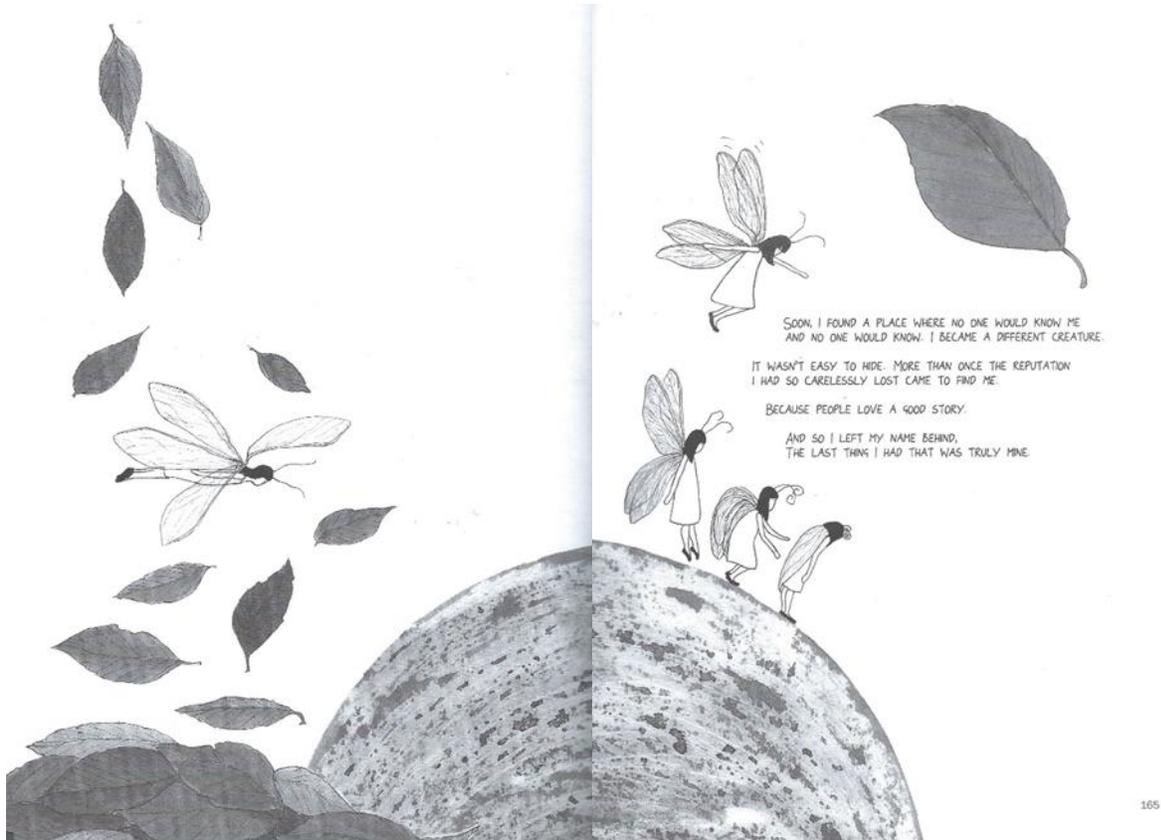
In the book of Judith, an ancient story, Judith saves her town and her people from an attack by a warlord, Holofernes. She visits him in his tent, pretends the attraction is

mutual, waits till he drinks himself unconscious... Then cuts off his head with a sword.
(134)

This narrative that the young Una so heavily relates to signifies the hostility and vengefulness that she felt but could not enact. In contrast to the other imagery and allusions made in *Becoming Unbecoming*, the allusion to the story of Judith depicts an empowered and vengeful Una, rather than the young Una that is undergoing severe emotional turmoil and psychological trauma. The imagery ultimately shifts to produce a survivor's narrative that is marked by images signifying liberation and growth.

The metaphorical images that fill the gaps of silence for the intra-diegetic Una converge at the end in a way that signifies a liberation from victimhood. As these images reappear, Una demonstrates her shift towards liberation from trauma as she says: "I decided that if I wanted to be heard, I'd better speak up. I suppose you could say I was a late developer. The past finally fell away like an echo. I found my feet and began to walk away from it" (168). In addition, Una claims that in her process towards liberation from her often-paralyzing trauma, she "became a different creature" (165). Una's "personal metamorphosis" (Donovan and Ustundag 231) is exemplified in a two-page spread (Figures 10 & 11), where the imagery of trees and wings resurface, this time, both signifying personal growth. In these images, Una finally attains the ability to utilize her wings, indicating her "personal metamorphosis" (Donovan and Ustundag 231) and that her body and her mind are no longer in disconnect, but synchronized. In addition, the leaves that are scattered across the pages contrast the previously bare trees and mark a shift from stagnation to flourishing. Finally, on this page, Una claims, "I left my name behind, the last thing I had that was truly mine" (165). Una concludes her narrative of psychological and

emotional turmoil as a victim of sexual assault and begins a metamorphosis towards liberation that is reified by her name change.



Figures 10 & 11: The intradiegetic Una now using her wings and surrounded by leaves (Una 164-165).

In concluding with these metaphorical images that signify liberation, Una severs herself from a past identity in which she was stigmatized by her silent victimhood, and embraces an identity defined by liberation and empowerment as a survivor. While the intra-diegetic Una remains a silent figure throughout the memoir, the metaphorical imagery employed in the text adds subjective visual distortions to the external world and functions to communicate Una's psychological trauma. By creating a subjective reality with metaphorical imagery, Una is able to better make her trauma perceptible to readers than words simply could convey. The images fill the gaps of her ineffable trauma, and, ultimately, they transform and shift from depicting

emotional and psychological burdens, to articulating growth and liberation. Crucial to Una's movement from a narrative of trauma to liberation is her declaration of her new identity as Una. With this new name, Una sheds her silent victimhood and asserts that she is no longer fragmented, but rather, one whole. Additionally, Una acknowledges a collective in the assertion of her new name, making a tribute to both victims and survivors of sexual assault by calling herself Una, "meaning one. One life of many..." (Una 10).

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Endnotes

1. All images are from *Becoming Unbecoming* and reproduced here under fair dealing.