Twenty-five soundings about child sexual abuse and the arts: considering the opera *Festen*

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Received 14 July 2025
Accepted 19 November 2025

ABSTRACT
A lyric essay by two writers and academics who are victim survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) perpetrated by their biological fathers. Taking a survivor-centred approach, and referring to their own lived experience, Clare Best and Patricia Debney interrogate representations of, and allusions to, CSA in the 2025 opera *Festen** in particular, and in the arts more generally, focusing on themes such as denial, use of language and the aftermath of trauma.
*The opera *Festen* (composer Mark-Anthony Turnage, librettist Lee Hall) was first staged at The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, in February 2025. Turnage and Hall based their opera on the 1998 Dogme 95 film with the same title, directed by Thomas Vinterberg. In *Festen,* revelations of CSA are made by Christian and Helena at their father Helge Klingefeldt's sixtieth birthday party. The drama revolves around the reactions and interactions of party guests, hotel staff and various members of the family including the perpetrator Helge and his wife Else (mother to his children).

* * *

1.

When child sexual abuse (CSA) is made the focus of art, we should examine which aspects are foregrounded. Are they the aspects most needing attention? Does the work acknowledge the feelings and experience of those who know most about the subject? Can art support understanding?

The 2025 opera *Festen* (Turnage 2025) headlines CSA. Turnage and Hall have said that showing denial at work was their main aim. Ironically, though, this focus can have the effect of validating denial. Some who encounter denial this way will sign up to it. Denial is less uncomfortable than looking something hard in the eye. Denial is a coping mechanism, after all.

Denial prefers strong opinions. Denial never spills the beans. Denial does not hear or see the desperate person, the reason for the unexpected suicide. Denial lets people look away, disbelieve what they know in their heart.

* * *

2.

If we consider that around 90% of all CSA is perpetrated by someone known to the child (NSPCC 2025, 15).

If we further consider that around 50% of all CSA is perpetrated by family members, the vast majority of whom are the victim's parents (Scott et al 2023, 3).

If we further consider that CSA perpetrators are 92% male (Karsna and Liz 2021, 9).

Then
then
and then
please tell me
why
no one can bring themselves
to believe
that yes
it's your neighbour
your friend
your doctor
your colleague

the taxi driver
the dentist
the piano tuner
the professor
the lawyer
the shopkeeper

and yes
the hotel owner
father of Linda and
Christian
no question

* * *

3.

In England and Wales, a staggering 24% of young adults aged 18–24 years have experienced some form of sexual abuse in childhood (NSPCC 2025, 4). A US meta-analysis estimated that 1 in 4 girls (26%) and 1 in 20 boys (5%) was sexually abused before age 18 (Karsna and Liz 2021, 16). And in 2022, there were about 3723 prosecutions for contact child sexual offences in England and Wales, with 2639 convictions achieved (Karsna and Bromley 2024, 35).

All of this means that less than 1% of the estimated yearly CSA crimes are reported and brought to justice. Which in turn means that over 99% of victim survivors of these crimes remain unheard, their abuse unrecognised, unacknowledged, and, in many instances, unspoken.

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To cite: Best C, Debney P. *Med Humanit* Epub ahead of print: [*please include* Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/medhum-2025-013465

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Our cases are typical: my father wasn't punished; C's father wasn't punished. Our fathers died with their families more or less by their sides. While we, sexually assaulted again and again as children, looked on, silent, shamed, damaged.

* * *

4.

There is no denying that, in many ways, *Festen* is a tour de force. Many decisions about its creation and production feel powerful, direct, significant:

- Despite the difficult subject matter, the words are fittingly direct, confrontational. The diction that the words and setting allow makes the disclosures and surrounding pandemonium painfully clear.
- Christian says 'rape'. A boy raped by a man.
- The performed silences echo the silences that victim survivors must manage both at the time of the abuse, and for their whole lives.
- The music writing is always verging on something like chaos, yet is held in a kind of powerful stasis throughout: we go through so much, but nothing changes.

However:

- *Nothing changes*. How can this be, after 100 minutes of bearing witness?
- Every single person at Helge's party turns away, including the statistical minority who are themselves silent survivors.
- This 15% of the population—both on stage and in the audience—are abandoned, left there with no comfort, no way through society's silence. In my recurring dream, I am left naked in a dark ditch. Why does *Festen* re-enact a survivor's worst rejection dreams?

* * *

5.

on first seeing	Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*
I knew at last I could breathe	a kind of breathing I'd wanted—under water
I was in	my element—
I could feel my way through	this nightmare
because I was dark too	and the darkness swallowed me
I recognised the shadows	the inky colours
I knew the music	already in my heart
here was a world of adults	mysterious and unapproachable—ghostly and real
here were children	different—like I was
this was my place	and I could dwell here
I had found a space where	I could breathe watery air
I could touch fear and beauty	meet my terror
make a home	of knowing and unknowing
for a while	for a little while

* * *

6.

There are all the questions I ask myself:

why me?
did I encourage him?
why did no one see?
what is a father supposed to be?

And all the questions others ask:

why didn't you tell someone?
why didn't you fight?
when will you recover?
do you forgive him?

Here, unanswered questions:

all of the above.

They orbit me, these dark moons around the habitable planet that is my life. They wax and wane, circling closer or further away. I know now that I will never be free of their gravity, their pull, their impenetrable silences.

* * *

7.

In the morning
Christian is alone
by the Reception Desk

no-one says
Good Morning
(to him)

and anyway
for Christian it is not a
Good
Morning

after last night after all the telling
he is again alone
waiting
to be received

Many of us spend years
decades
by that Reception Desk
alone and unreceived

unseen unheard unnoticed

We become accustomed to this

although some mornings
(even a lifetime later)
it feels
like the first time

realising
how difficult it is
even to say
Good Morning to ourselves

* * *

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8.

I wish I could say that disclosing my father's sexual abuse was The Turning Point. That everyone was sorry, and that together we embarked on the path to Recovery.

This is what actually happened:

- When I was 16, it's likely that my stepmother found and read my journal, where there was a single entry about my father's abuse. We all went into therapy. They went into marriage counselling. My own therapist broke the law and did not report my father. Instead, my father told me about his traumatic childhood. At 17, I left that house and never lived there again.
- At 19, I disclosed to a university counsellor. His reply: 'I imagine that some of the problem here is that it felt good.'
- At 21, I disclosed to a writing professor. She cried and phoned the therapist I then saw for 3 years free of charge.

Until he died, my father denied the extent of the abuse. My stepmother stayed married to him, and remains silent and estranged to this day.

So, I ask you: what happened in your family? Do you know? Look carefully at the relative you no longer see, the one who seemed to disappear. The one no one talks about anymore, whose photos are removed from the sitting room. Like Christian. Like Linda. Like me. Like an estimated one in six children.

* * *

9.

If we consider that 'up to two-thirds of children do not disclose abuse during childhood, and only around 25% of those who are abused [disclose at all]', then we begin to comprehend the scale and intensity of secrecy and silence surrounding CSA.

If we consider that 'the average time for victims and survivors to disclose sexual abuse is 26 years' (The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) 2023, 266), then we can guess Christian is around 30+ years old.

Remember your life at 30. At least one in six of you will understand Christian. For the others: imagine trying to love, have sex, believe in the value of having children, stay alive for all of this, despite everything. Imagine trying to figure out how to feel safe.

Consider this: if no one saved you, how can you know anything about saving yourself?

* * *

10.

Christian, during the first of his revelatory arias in Hall's libretto for *Festen*, discloses his father's abuse:

'He was always having baths.
He's a very clean man.
It was usually in the afternoon.
He'd call us to the study.
Me and my sister,
And then he'd lock the door.
And take his shirt off.
And then take his trousers off.
And then we would do the same.
Then he'd make us choose a colour.
Blue or green.
And he'd lay us across the sofa.
And he'd rape us.
He raped us.
He sexually abused us.
He fucked his little children.'

(Lee Hall, unpublished libretto sent to authors, 2025)

Christian spells out Helge's actions four times, using 'rape' twice, then the more accepted term 'sexual abuse'. Finally: 'He fucked his little children.' Christian is given words to disclose CSA to his audience at Helge's party, but the opera makers know the words must be clear yet shocking to their opera audience too. Christian may also repeat himself because he finds it difficult to accept his own truth.

The voicing of his trauma starts with the word most often used in cases of the sexual assault of adults—'rape'—the definition of which depends on the matter of consent, and is thus a word irrelevant to a child's situation, when consent cannot be given: '[t]he legal definition of rape is when someone puts their penis in another person's vagina, anus or mouth, without the person's permission' (Police UK 2025).

Then Christian says, 'He sexually abused us'. This might have been added for the benefit of the opera audience—it's a phrase they'll know from press reports. Bald words, with an air of abstract officialdom.

Now Hall has Christian say, 'He fucked his little children'. Guests and opera audience can be in no doubt now about what went on.

Three verbal shocks. Then Else, Christian's mother, interrupts him; the power of her voicing his name shuts him up. His next words, 'He was a very clean man. Baths. Morning. Noon. And night' (Hall 2025) return the narrative to the darkly ironic metaphorical ground of the lead-in to disclosure.

The words in general circulation when talking and writing about CSA and its aftermaths are limited, stale. We need fresh vocabulary to extend thought beyond the facts of what happened physically (rape, sexual abuse, fucking) to express and explore the immense psychological, emotional, health-related and other hinterlands of damage that reach into the abused child's future, the survivor's whole life, not to mention the lives of those around them.

Language is agency. We need to put the power of words and images back into the heads, hearts and mouths of those who know—the children who were (and are) raped, abused, fucked, the adults they become. Let us choose words that express what we have coped with, who we have grown into, everything we live with. It will be a language of suffering, but also a rich language of hope and perseverance.

* * *

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11.

My father did not technically rape me. Not quite.

What language then do I use to describe the awfulness of what he did? As a writer, after all, I am an expert in language.

Here are some things my father did, many times, all before I was 14:

- Lifted up my shirt and squeezed my growing breasts
- Pretended to give me a backrub, and slunk his hand down to my anus, vagina, and clitoris
- Took off my pyjamas
- Raised up my nightgown
- Put his tongue in my mouth
- Pressed his penis against my vagina
- Performed oral sex on me
- Penetrated me with his fingers
- Tried to get me to perform oral sex on him
- Told me about sex with his old girlfriends
- Told me all of this was for my own good
- Read my diaries
- Followed me to babysitting jobs
- Listened into my phone conversations with friends
- Told me that I was beautiful
  that I was special
  that we had a special relationship
  that he loved me

Is there any way to write—or sing—these words such that they don't risk falling into the areas of 'shock value', or 'melodrama', or 'exaggeration'?

How can writers and artists talk about the sexual abuse of children—tell their own stories or stories on behalf of others—without inadvertently giving the audience an excuse to turn away because it's 'too awful'?

Until we can say words to audiences who witness and believe them, who understand that these words represent reality for so many, and who know they must sit in this uncomfortable space—until art breaks through these barriers of silencing and performative horror: the full impact of CSA will remain at the edges of mainstream writings and productions.

* * *

12.

And this: we lack the language to speak of trauma and abuse without it carrying shadows of pity, blame, shame and darkness. The cutting irony of all of this—the irony which can make me weep some days—is that victim survivors are forced to carry it all, purely because no one else will. Pity, blame, shame, darkness: all are foisted on us. As if these words are *ours*.

But they are not ours; they belong to perpetrators.

As survivors, we are (once again) forced to sit quietly with Linda's death as with many others, knowing that this might have been any of us. We build our campfire and sit around it. We tell stories here, outside the reinforced walls of social expectations; we send up smoke signals, hoping that new words will form: *trust, belief, care*. Hoping that people will emerge with blankets, lead us inside. That someone who matters will apologise. And that those who did this to us will be sent naked into the freezing wilderness.

* * *

13.

HEAR THIS

repudiate \\ reject \\ refuse \\ withdraw
withhold \\ gainsay \\ cold shoulder \\ ignore
dismiss \\ contradict \\ rebuff \\ exclude
blind eye \\ deaf ear \\ negate \\ refute
shun \\ abandon \\ veto \\ scapegoat
minimise \\ play down \\ disregard \\ forget
imprison \\ deny \\ deny \\ deny

NOW ALL HEAR THIS

listen / support / sustain / uphold /
herald / wait / nourish / believe /
cherish / care for / liberate / see
stand with / stand up for / love / affirm /
foster / encourage / trust / look after /
champion / help / accept / endorse /
uphold / listen / sustain / support /

* * *

14.

Christian believed he was speaking his truth. But it fell like stones—nuisances, the occasional bruise. His sister Linda, also a victim: where is she? We see her in the bath, then emerging through the sofa. We hear her words first through her sister Helena, in a tight, emotionless aria, then through her own aria, surprising in its lyricism—purporting that all is well and shall be well.

Linda is dead by her own hand. Christian is viewed by the assembled guests as a fantasist. It is difficult to locate and hold both victims' truths—their traumas, tortures, sorrows, furies—on ground which from the start is shifting, and in voices which redirect our sympathies at times into disbelief.

The golden rule of handling a disclosure of CSA is to *believe the victim*. I am not sure Turnage and Hall leave enough space on stage for the audience to believe the victims. *Festen* raises the ugly spectre of CSA, then shuts it down. My sense is that *Festen* verges on telling the audience at least partly what it wants to hear.

Afterwards, on the way to the train, C and I encounter a woman in the lift who spots our *Festen* programme. 'Does that shed any light on the show?' she asks. 'Is Christian making it all up?'

* * *

15.

All I know for sure is that again and again no one speaks up for me. Neither me as an adult, nor me as a child.

And when I dare speak, I am glanced over. Briefly registered. Then shut down, spoken over, not taken seriously. No action, therefore, necessary.

Is *Festen* an improvement? So much in the whole production is moving and powerful, breathtaking and clever. But where is space for the survivors' stories? Where are they truly heard? When all is said and done: is this production any different from mainstream treatments of CSA over the last century or so?

I can't recall ever feeling 'seen' on a mainstream stage, book, piece of art of any sort. Here's the truth: I have never seen

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myself as a survivor represented in a way which feels true. And alas, this goes for *Festen* too.

I have spent 50 years alert to any implication of abuse, any 'hidden darkness' in families as a way to locate my own story. Grasping at the straws of what my life might look like—isn't good enough.

It needs to go like this: we speak out. You listen, believe. You turn to those who did this, you condemn them.

You must take action on behalf of every victim. Any indication otherwise is cruel, and a betrayal, regardless of the potential artistic value of ambiguity.

We are holding our hands up. We are so bloody tired. We can't continue to carry this weight and simply hope to be heard, or hope for change. It's killing us. You need to stare into the hottest part of the fire now. You need to see what we see, and you need to help. Stop taking refuge in what you think you know.

* * *

16.

Individual denial can become social and cultural denial.

Rather than acknowledge CSA's continuing impacts, history puts CSA in a box: that was then, this is now, and 'now' is safer, better, healed. Whereas in fact—noted in numerous studies and through thousands of lived experience testimonials—being sexually abused as a child causes lifelong trauma.

Lifelong trauma. Let this sink in.

About 15% of the entire population is sexually abused in childhood. This is not an exaggeration. These people carry lifelong trauma from CSA.

Most survivors of CSA I know never 'gave anything away'. They were 'good' children. Some grew up to look a bit like Christian—dishevelled, disturbed, alcoholic. Others grew up to be very successful, 'normal' looking, 'well-adjusted'—you could say this is true of C and me. Unless we disclose, no one would ever guess that our fathers sexually abused us when we were children.

And then there are those we lose to suicide. Like Linda. Like so many who do not leave notes at all, who never disclose, who believe it is all their fault, who drown in shame. Whose dreams haunt them in their waking lives. Victim survivors are three times more likely to attempt suicide than those who have not been abused (Angelakis et al 2019).

* * *

17.

During the opening sequence of the typical Scandi noir, a shaky camera follows a young girl running through dark woods. We hear panicked breathing, breaking twigs. She trips, falls. Sometimes she sees a shadowy figure among the trees. She's injured, bleeding. The assailant catches up, covers her mouth with his hand. The screen goes black.

Next, the girl is coming round in a caravan, shed, basement—bound and gagged. The viewer may guess at the varieties of abuse she has undergone. Sometimes the shadowy figure brings food, water, or is seen in other shots going about his 'normal' life. Yes, he is normal.

The clichéd conventions of this genre tell metaphorical truths. The girl trying to escape is a child being groomed. Her relationship with the assailant is one in which he has all the power. Her distress is PTSD. Her place of isolation and capture is how she must now exist.

Hundreds of thousands—even millions—of people watch such thrillers as entertainment. Yet the real life stories and testimonies of people who have come through abuse and who live with the aftermath have difficulty finding audiences.

Do people prefer the fiction of the dark fairy tale to the reality? Would they rather think about Bluebeard than Jimmy Savile, Helge, my father or P's? Perhaps audiences prefer to imagine such horrors are invented?

Recently, I watched *The Glass Dome* (2025)—a Scandi noir series that is different. The screenwriter Camilla Läckberg based this drama on survivors' lived experiences. Aspects of complex PTSD, flashbacks, repressed memories, community silencing and long-term life effects of abuse inform the drama, which is much more tense and convincing as a result.

* * *

18.

One way CSA won't leave us alone is by taking away our agency, fatally weakening our ability to determine our actions in life situations, in repeating abuses, in addictions and in prison cells. So we can find ourselves trapped and unable to do anything about it. Our perpetrators often tell us that we are worthless, that we don't deserve better (note Helge in *Festen*: 'It was all you were good for' (Hall 2025)). So these become the messages we send ourselves too, knowing nothing else.

Sexual abuse tends to obliterate any sense of self. The bodily and psychological traumas of CSA tend to short-circuit our emotional, logical and practical responses. Instead, shame and guilt block every exit.

* * *

19.

Some days
I don't think : but
my body
reacts

on a train a man leans towards me
he's been drinking
:
he reaches his hand
across the aisle
to get my
attention

(he wants
to say something :
what does he want to say ?)

seeing his hand I remove
earphones (without thinking)

allowing
my default : to pay attention

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(my default : to comply)

even though even though even though
it was almost
seventy years ago
I learned
(my
de fault)

* * *

20.

> 'There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.' (Darling 1981)

It is surely one of the responsibilities of the public story-teller to consider carefully the feelings of those in agony who bear untold stories inside them, and the many who want to, who cannot, or who will never be able to tell.

> 'I find that the affliction is a little like malaria. It stays in the body, and from time to time, I reduce back to that'. For all the things Maya Angelou has done in her life, she says, for all her reputation as a writer, the financial security, for all the 'awards, accomplishments, and they are really quite formidable, there isn't one day since I was raped that I haven't thought about it . . . I have gotten beyond hate and fear, but there is something beyond that.' (Darling 1981)

Trauma collapses time, the malaria effect. This is known today as triggering. The past ambushes the present. Survivors also tend to do a lot of conscious remembering—to continue healing, integrating.

> 'I have great respect for the past. If you don't know where you've come from, you don't know where you're going. I have respect for the past, but I'm a person of the moment. I'm here, and I do my best to be completely centred at the place I'm at, then I go forward to the next place.' (Cordova 2014)

This is how survivors live.

* * *

21.

Abused lives are delayed lives. My own is an example. Childhood and teen years: stolen. Twenties: numb, with bouts of depression, anxiety, problems with physical health, failed relationships with men.

I eventually left home, aged 28, in 1983. In the years that followed, I tried different therapies, but because I didn't 'know' the root cause of my problems, and I didn't yet 'remember' that I'd been sexually abused, I was searching in darkness. Each attempt at therapy fizzled out.

In 1994, I served on a jury at The Old Bailey for a case of CSA. After a few days, I was having panic attacks and nightmares. At 39, my past had finally caught up with me. But I had a full-time job, a marriage, and we were trying to start a family. I pushed the feelings under again.

Following my mother's death in 1999, I experienced morbid fears and phobias, insomnia and flashbacks. I wrote down memories and thoughts that haunted me. I tucked the writings away.

Witnessing my father's terminal cancer from 2007 hauled up buried truths. In 2008, at the age of 52, I went into therapy that was to last 10 years. My father died in 2009.

During my 10-year therapeutic journey, I confronted my abusive childhood and its fallout. I grieved. I worked through physical, emotional and psychological issues. Around all this I began, at last, to live my life fully.

* * *

22.

This is the life I have—my one life
This is my one life that is imperfect
Everybody's life is imperfect
This is my imperfect life that is nevertheless beautiful
This is how I live it
I live it imperfectly but as beautifully as I can
I try to be kind, honest
I try to love well
I remain open
I love my one imperfect life, for otherwise what would I do
I have learned to love all of it, all of me, all the beauty and imperfections
All the ugliness and pain
Every miracle of looking hard at the past and still being able to breathe
I have learned to love every moment of being alive
Because I have looked at not having a life
I have in fact at times not had a life to speak of
But I have never seriously contemplated ending my life, though I have wished myself non-existent, which is different
I have come back from that
I have come back
I choose to focus on beech leaves in April
On a breeze agitating the surface of a puddle
On people I love, people who love me
On how I have managed to live my one imperfect life
Despite all the odds
Despite all
This is my one life

* * *

23.

Art has never been reserved for safe, comfortable subjects—quite the reverse.

Art needs to cross the line, remove signs that say 'taboo—no entry' and 'this far but no farther'.

Art addressing CSA can:

- Shock, educate, inform
- Provoke discussion
- Provide spaces for survivors to dwell, belong, explore their emotions and ideas
- Tell the truth about the immediate fallout, the lifelong fallout, the life effects that can destroy entire families and not just survivors' lives
- Articulate the complexities of families, individuals and institutions affected by CSA
- Do everything that art on other 'themes' does, and more
- Allow CSA to leave its ghetto

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- Bust myths, such as 'those who have been abused become abusers'
- Normalise talking about CSA
- Acknowledge and embed the diversity and complexity of survivors' many and various life experiences
- Gather allies
- Help people understand that survivors need not be defined by one aspect of their lives (unless they wish to be)
- Centre survivors as experts by experience, as equal co-producers
- Lead to changes around how survivors are treated—for example, more trauma-informed strategies in education, healthcare, the workplace
- Help stop abuse that's happening now, help prevent future CSA.

* * *

24.

In *Festen*, after the revelations of abuse, culminating in Helena's reading of her sister Linda's suicide note, Christian confronts his father: 'Why did you do it?'. When Helge delivers his devastating response, 'It was all you were good for' (Hall 2025), Christian collapses.

The long-awaited articulation of the rottenness at the core of the family provokes Christian's brother Michael into murderous pursuit of Helge. Michael gives him a beating, until the other characters, and the audience, believe he's dead.

But Helge's reappearance in the morning shows him 'looking remarkably fresh' (Hall 2025) as the stage directions point out, with a sticking plaster over a cut on his forehead. Christian, however, is in a state of exhaustion and despair, ignored by family and guests.

Is this morning scene the zenith of Turnage's and Hall's portrayal of the evils of denial, as they have suggested? It *may* be interpreted as the light of day correcting the dark madness of last night's party.

Might the creators of this fine opera have demonstrated the strength of witness that Christian would have drawn out of at least some of those at the party?

Because change *is* happening, there is discussion of this subject, although dialogue is awkward, vulnerable. Don't we have a duty, as artists, to reflect that change, to recruit allies, and to foster hope?

* * *

25.

Given all this, we might ask: what do victim survivors want from representations of CSA in art?

For every moment we want, there are moments we do not want, anymore.

We want to be:

consulted
listened to
heard
believed
embodied
    enacted
    inhabited

We would like to take up space. We would like space made for us. After all, our experiences are everywhere in the mainstream.

Instead, and thus far, art prefers that we:

remain victims
are pitied
stay 'over there'
stay powerless

Art is comfortable:

sensationalising us
pathologizing us
medicalising us

Right now, art is content for victim survivors to carry all the darkness. Content for us to stand outside the walls of civilised society, as if we carry disease, horror, contagion. As if this is a burden of our own making, for which we must pay the price.

So, what do we want instead?

We want a place at the table. With a chair, and elbow room. Space at:

Lolita's table
Miles' and Flora's table
Festen's table

We want our art and accurate representations of us and our lives—our many narratives, our many experiences and circumstances—to reach the main stage. After all, our truths are deeply woven into millions and millions of life stories the world over.

We want our stories to be centred and told in the round. We want our stories heard, and never again distorted, muted, silenced. We have critical mass. We have voices, and so much to bring to the table.

Contributors CB and PD have worked equally on the lyric essay they are submitting and are equal contributors in every sense. CB is the guarantor.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Ethics approval Not applicable.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

NOTES

1. Lolita is the child victim of paedophile Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*.
2. Miles and Flora are the children featured in Benjamin Britten's opera *The Turn of the Screw*.
3. Throughout this essay materials developed by Survivors Voices (https://survivorsvoices.org) have underpinned our formulations.

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