

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 26
Issue 2 *Summer*

Article 86

1996

From "Witness"

Juliana Spahr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spahr, Juliana. "From "Witness"." *The Iowa Review* 26.2 (1996): 179-183. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4652>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Juliana Spahr

FROM *WITNESS*

I

when terrible things happen they must be witnessed

II

The narrative begins when a person walks into an office to give blood. The arm that is handed over is frail. A rubber tube is tied around this arm by a nurse. The arm gradually goes numb. The person orders the nurse: talk to me. The nurse talks about what s/he is doing. S/he says this rubber tubing will build up the pressure in your arm, will isolate your blood, will allow the removal of a limited amount of blood. The needle pricks the person's arm. Two vials of blood are filled. The blood is deep red. It contains within it the information that will provide witness.

in the case of blood, witness is charting

these charts might be held on clipboards, hung at the end of the bed
might be submitted to the court
might be discussed in a run down health services office

witness: I finally got tested and felt relief but still fear for the future

IV

attempts at witnessing:

a person sits in a hospital bed watching television

a person waits for a ride at the street corner

a person has a dream and discounts its validity

a car arrives and picks up a person after a conversation at a window

a person agrees to have sex with another person in the back of a car on
a deserted road

all the while:

a person turns to another person and says: they were unable to stop the
bleeding

a person gets an infusion of liquid through an iv

a person gets shot after shot, takes pill after pill

V

because there is little information distributed by the system and its
institutions other forms of information appear

a person says I am a teenager and I give you information

a person gives a talk before a group of people

a person brings bleach around to clean needles

these instruct in forms of protection
the drawings that accompany this form of witness are simply lined,
pornographic
abstinence is not really given much credence

instead language is explicit

it says
that dick has to be hard before you put a condom on it

it says
if the penis is uncut (uncircumcised), pull the foreskin back first

it says
for anal intercourse, use lots of lube. Lube is great for vaginal
intercourse, too

the language of this discourse is a marriage of scientific terms, personal
observation, and pornography
it is often detached and without anger

but there is another sort of discourse that adds anger
people yell at congresspeople as they enter their workplace
people stage die-ins
people carry signs and scream
people shut down churches, march in parades, carry banners where not
wanted

the anger is to draw attention to the way anger is a just response
to how they will be angry until just witness is begun

VIII

an attempt to speak to the human moment will occur
in these moments someone touches someone
someone claims to love someone
someone moves closer to someone in prelude to a proposition
someone waits outside for someone to come by
someone becomes unable to live his/her life and succumbs

this is information that might be left out of witness
yet it has a bearing that is all the more strong
it speaks to the safety of immunity that does not exist
to the various other kinds of immunity that do exist
such as an emotional immunity to the world
or a feeling of safety

which one do you believe?

just as a group of people join a cult of safe sex another group is formed
that refuses to do so
this group might be teenagers or adults or women or men
this second group of people might feel that death is part of any act and accept
the risks or they might just be naive or feel bullied

people from the first group often join the second group at various points in
their lives and vice versa

people often lie about which group they belong to at any given moment

which group one belongs to on any given night might involve a highly
elaborate struggle of power that depends on who is dominant, who loves, who
is lost, who is drunk or stoned, who feels safe, who feels unsafe, who cares,
who doesn't care

these struggles are endlessly variable and unchartable

they are absent from the rhetoric that is a marriage of scientific terms, personal
observation, and pornography
they are moments that are impossible to witness
yet they are the moments that are so much a part of the everyday of everyone's
day or night
so they become some of the most important moments
and they are beyond the boundaries and limits of what is said by both the ill
and the well

in a world without hope, there is only hope

in a place of disease, there is only hope

in a time of trouble, the song instructs, turn to me

who is me?

who cares?

X

turn on the lights

one person urges another person

turn on the lights