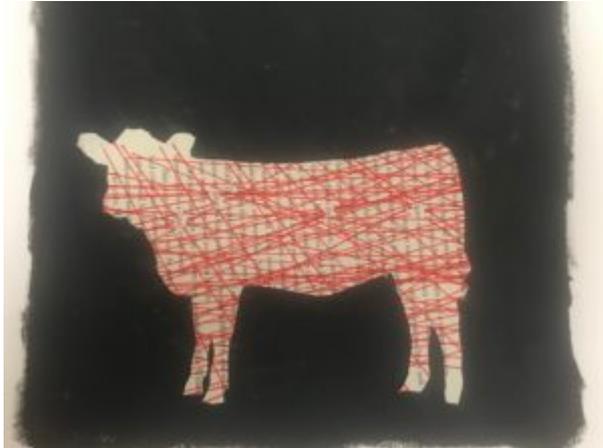


WOVEN: A Self that Doesn't Stay on Brand

written by Guest Contributor | September 18, 2019



WOVEN is an Entropy series and dedicated safe space for essays by persons who engage with #MeToo, sexual assault and harassment, and #DomesticViolence, as well as their intersections with mental illness, substance addiction, and legal failures and remedies. We believe you. If selected for the series, we want to provide the editorial and human support such that our conversation continues long after the stories and names have changed. You can view submission guidelines for WOVEN [here](#).

Reread the [archives](#), always.

I. No English to Object

When I was manic and using Craigslist casual encounters to find hookup partners, the question I got asked by potential partners more than any other was, "Are you real?" Meaning, I think: Are you certain you're not a bot? Certain you're not a dude? Certain you're not going to ask me for money?

*

Growing up, I so hated being in snapshots. I went so far once as to throw myself across a car to prevent my stepmother from looking at newly developed photos because I was terrified I looked wrong in them. What was wrong? Perhaps I didn't look real enough?

*

One of the fascinating parts of using Craigslist to arrange hookups was meeting men who were active on the Craigslist personals. I learned from them that men on the m4w section might only receive answers to their ads from bots sending them to a "verification" site run by scammers seeking their credit card number or women looking to get paid or from other men who might make the claim that all they had to do was close their eyes and imagine they were getting blown by a woman. I think for men the proportion of welcome messages to noise was something like one to fifty or worse. In addition, I had, at best, received well over 200 emails in response to an ad, and never got fewer than 30. For men, even active users, five responses to a single posted ad meant they had done well, even if most were noise.

*

The first time I saw one of Cindy Sherman's self portraits was at the Walker in Minneapolis. I was probably eight years old, and I walked into a gallery to suddenly find myself face to face with Sherman looking distraught and wearing a dark suit in a photograph that, at least in memory, was life size. I remember wanting to know everything I could about this woman and what I would now describe as her ever-changing fictional selves. Selves which somehow seem more real than a single, stable self, a self that stays on brand. Sherman creates so many selves no one can keep up really. In the *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman creates a place for the self to become plural, to become so numerous as to defy interpretation.

I would say I got my best ideas in church to try to please everyone. There were those who said, "That's the best place to get ideas, how inspiring" and those who said, "Of course you do, better than paying attention." Both groups would smile and nod with just enough approval. If I was unclear, inchoate, nebulous, or even ambiguous I was a screen onto which whatever idea might be projected. I preferred being a screen to asserting identity. To assert identity meant I might be judged for that identity. And in a small town judgment felt dangerous, it could mean being cut off socially or worse, gossiped about. Gossip isn't idle; gossip is designed to punish those who mar the status quo.

*

I can tell you, with certainty, that when meeting the men of Craigslist casual encounters they were at their most themselves. There's an intensity inherent in such connections. The sense that you are unlikely to see someone again spurs, among other things, radical honesty. Many, even most, were good to me. By good, I mean not just picking up the tab for drinks, but caring

about my pleasure, my safety, my comfort, and being willing to talk through sex and fantasies, to plan what we might do. These men explored with me, these men were part of why the Craigslist casual encounters section was so deeply compelling.

*

I won a state fair trip with a breeding heifer when I was fifteen. My heifer's name, at least the one I gave her, if not the one on her papers as registered with the American Angus Association was Agnes; however, I called her Eyelashes most of the time. When I showed her at the state fair we won a ribbon, probably red. I was happy to get it even if it wasn't blue or purple. She set up well, her legs landing square with little help from me. Her hair was so soft, and she had the best eyelashes of any being I've ever met. I'm sure there are pictures of us in the show ring. Me perfecting her stance, or holding the halter or rope as the judge walked around the class of heifers. A kid who hung around the barn loved Eyelashes even more than I did. I'd often look over from our little seating area to the stall beside me and find Casey curled up with Eyelashes in the straw. I have no memories of anyone ever being alarmed that a six-or-seven-year-old girl child was so close to a thousand pound heifer.

When I looked at Cindy Sherman's photographs, if I turned my head slightly I could see myself superimposed on her, looking back at myself. I was a tiny child—literally. I was thin, prone to smiling, my hair was just a bit too long to be curly. I would stay blonde, but not thin, not prone to smiling.

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard writes of steers being "beef stew," and "shoes;" Dillard even shouts at them across the field "Swedish Meatballs!" Then she calls them a "product like rayon." The steers do not object, but they also don't have English. I imagine those steers near Tinker Creek being not so different from the heifers, cows, calves, bulls, steers of my father's cattle operation. They would stand on the other side of the electric fence, in the tall grass of pasture land, some of which might be original, unbroken, never plowed, authentic prairie.

In her essay "In the Body that Once was Mine," published in *The Sun*, Eva Saulitis writes of a belief she has breast cancer, and yet she tamps that knowledge down for weeks after finding the lump, after the diagnostic mammogram. She writes, "I inhabited not a story but a body." In that moment, Saulitis, the body, Saulitis, the thinking, observing writer, inhabits fear and avoidance. Soon her body will meet the story of diagnosis and then treatment.

I read Saulitis' piece for an environmental lit class. I was overworked that semester, had signed up for three tough classes, was working, and was sick more often than not. This was the one class I earned a B in. This class was the reason I wouldn't graduate with a 4.0 when I earned my Women's Studies

certificate that May. I was running on determination and coffee that semester. Yet, Saulitis grabbed me. I always wanted to inhabit stories, but had never wanted to inhabit a body.

My other grandmother died of breast cancer a decade before I was born, when my mother was thirteen years old. Breast cancer lives in my imagination as a cloud of loss, a lack of words, an excess of fear. As for me, I've had three diagnostic mammograms which have led to various tests including a six month follow up appointment with the ultrasound tech. I've never been diagnosed with a malignancy, but I am not a stranger to the rigors of cancer or its diagnosis. I never met this grandmother. She is, for me, a lack of words, a cloud of loss.

I believe that in encounters with the mammography machine, that under the ultrasound wand, in the stress position of the MRI machine, that in being called out of the inner waiting room for what is described as 'just a few more pictures,' one is a product like a heifer, breeding or commercial. Somewhere along in the process towards the meat locker.

In the MRI machine my breasts hung into a plastic device called a coil, my arms stretched above my head. My job was to do nothing but what I was told, which was to stay still. I was to hold my breath or exhale, just enough attention required that falling asleep or pretending to be elsewhere was impossible. When I expressed relief at being out of the machine and distress at the experience the tech only told me it gets worse.

*

Sunday dinner at Grandma Ruth's was often nice, but rarely did the fine china and fancy serving dishes come out. On occasion a friend or relative would visit and the good serving dishes appeared. Even rarer, one of my grandma's former professors from the little Lutheran liberal arts college she had attended in the early '40s would stay the weekend. Before Sunday dinner the professor would lead us all in prayer for some time. Then Grandma sent the food around, the ham and accompanying raisin sauce, the Swedish meatballs, the custard, the green beans, carrot sticks, bread and butter.

I'm uncomfortable saying I'm a product or that my doctor views me as one, even as an insurance company gave her money to send me to the rigors of mammography machine, the MRI, the ultrasound.

*

Unlike an MRI, selfies are somehow thought of as inauthentic images. Perhaps it's the casual posturing? Or duck lips?

*

In casual discussion we know what real is. The Velveteen Rabbit was real.

People, mostly female acquaintances in that micro-generation between X and Millennial, tell me duck lips are not ironic.

*

As observed from the road the cattle herd is beautiful, calm, at ease. Before the heat of the day they take a bite of grass, look up, see me, stare, take a step towards the stream, take a drink, walk towards the corner of the pasture on higher ground. Each animal numbered with a freeze brand on the side. I remembered there was branding at the farm when I was a teenager. Dad tells me it was freeze branding, more humane than hot branding. The point of a unique identifier for every animal is to be able to keep records, to track their weight, their wean date, the birth weight of their calves if a breeding animal. To use data to determine if a breeding program is headed in the right or wrong direction. To know how each steer of a particular bull weighed at market. To know what the return on investment was.

As a woman hooking up on Craigslist, wanting nothing other than satisfaction I was an enigma to many of the men I met. I was trying to not be a product, to not be implicated in economic systems, even as I painted my nails, put on lipstick, and chose pretty lingerie.

Nearly one hundred years ago Margery Williams wrote a children's book called *The Velveteen Rabbit* about toys desiring to become real.

An old toy says to the Velveteen Rabbit: "Sometimes . . . when you are real you don't mind being hurt." In *The Velveteen Rabbit* wear and pain are the cost of admission to being real.

If, as they insist, duck lips are not meant to be ironic this knowledge is one of the greatest disappointments of my late thirties.

Some ways of speaking of fear and horrible pain are as indirect as catching a bit of my self reflected in the glass covering the Cindy Sherman self-portrait at the Walker in Minneapolis. Some ways of speaking of clouds of loss or excesses of fear expect the coherence of language to be recognized.

If being real means you will ignore pain, is this why the men of Craigslist casual encounters would ask, "Are you real?" Do they believe your reality is license to cause pain?

*

And now, right here, is the danger piece.

And this is always the place that stops. The signpost where I see myself careening in a manic space; there are just a few too many turns, and the danger is real. This is the spot where men most themselves are not always the most good, the most entertaining, the most fun.

And, of course, nothing here is academic. I was raped. I was raped violently enough that I didn't return to my apartment for weeks, until long after the bruises finally gave back my vulnerable pink skin.

*

An hour after we had sent twelve emails back and forth I let him into my apartment. This was less vetting than usual, but he had seemed so normal. He asked me to take off my top and bra. He turned me away from him, and stood right behind me. He was so close I could feel his body against my back. I leaned into him. He began touching my breasts from behind with his hands, bare skin against bare skin. He then squeezed. The pressure was just too hard to not feel great, but didn't hurt. Then it was horrible pain. I raised my hands and tried to pull his hands away. He only squeezed much harder. He kissed my neck softly. I was struggling by this point, but the position we were in left me with no advantage. I tried to slide forwards and away, but he only increased the intensity. The more I struggled, the more painful he made it. I never said hurt me. I might have told him I would love it if he spanked me; that's something true, something I often said. But I know I never said hurt me or bruise me.

If I had fought him, maybe I could have stomped his foot, but my bare feet versus his shoed feet seemed like a bad idea. My best bet would have been a swift back kick to his knee. I considered it. The problem was what I would do after. If I succeeded, he'd go down, and then he'd still be between me and the one door. If I failed . . . I didn't want to know.

*

But aren't objects outside fear? If objects are outside fear, then aren't products also outside fear?

*

I kept thinking he must be about to stop. I was so perplexed as to why he was doing this. What was he possibly getting from it? Did I not exist to him? He had been squeezing and twisting for a few minutes. I no longer thought he would stop merely because I wanted him to. I was no longer trying to pull his hands away. I was no longer trying to twist away. I was not having "fun." I did not think 'fun' was on the agenda. I was starting to realize my agenda, which had been to have an orgasm and to connect in that casual, temporary way was so far from reality as to be unrecognizable. I was instead wondering whether I would get out of this, but be bruised. After another two minutes I was mostly quiet and still. I realized I had gone limp. I realized I wasn't noticing anything but pain. I realized I was like a rag doll. My awareness was centered in my breasts, in pain, in the place I was stuck, in the body that I was stuck in. I started wondering about his agenda. I began to focus on what would happen after he let go. How would he leave me? As fully in that pain as I was I could imagine an end to it, an end to me. Instantly, I knew I would do anything to postpone that end.

*

The defining characteristic of the manic side of bipolar disorder as I have experienced it is to be outside fear.

Apparently, fear still could be battered into me.

II. Taking the Self-portrait, the Selfie

I was born in December of 1980, the last month of the last year of Generation X, according to the Pew Research Center. There are different demographers labeling and separating the generations; however, my point is that I'm just old enough to have listened to Nirvana when Kurt Cobain was still alive, to know how to rescue a cassette tape that has barfed its magnetic tape off the reel, and to have wanted to go to Glamour Shots more than anything. Besides Glamour Shots the photo booth at the mall was the only other thing even close to selfies that existed in my formative years.

I remember my first girlfriend and I both claimed to believe that photographing everything was a way to avoid experiencing life. It was to see

life through a lens rather than to live it. This was circa 1997. This was a fringe view for a problem that was then minute, and would only increase in magnitude. We didn't take photos of each other, we lived those moments.

I took photos of random arranged objects, once an empty gallon ice cream bucket with a rock in it. When people asked "What is that?" or "Why would you waste film on that?" I would say "It's art." Certainly, I did not take photos of myself. I disapproved of myself in other's photos. I disapproved when in the family photograph for the church directory my short skirt was cropped out leaving me looking three or four years younger than the thirteen years I possessed. I disapproved when I was photographed crouching at the county fair at fifteen. My hips seemed too big, and my bangs were all wrong. I hated how I photographed. I hated it when people told me I was pretty. I hated looking pretty. Looking pretty always seemed to mean looking acceptable, but according to someone else's definition of acceptable.

Unlike the steers I have English. I can object with this not quite perfect language we have, this English no less or more perfect than any other language. Sometimes I think my words will lie there judged incoherent by those who tell me duck lips are not ironic, by those who say selfies are frivolous, or that, of course, a patient isn't a product like meat. I can object, yet is it possible to be comprehended? Is it worth showing snapshots of who I am, even though they are numerous, even though they, of course, contradict each other just like this literary tradition I write in.

A friend took a photo of me in our clubroom last September. I was wearing my newish darling jacket that appears as if it wasn't purchased at Target, jeans, a cute necklace. I looked happy, I looked cute. My Facebook friends seemed to agree. At least 99 of them liked it.

No blog post I'd shared had ever gotten ninety-nine interactions. When my art installation about hook ups and bipolar disorder was covered in the lifestyle section of my city's daily paper twenty-two people interacted with that post on my personal page.

People on social media liked that selfie in a way they will never like the things I do, rather than the way they like the body I'm in.

*

To receive medical intervention has always felt to me to be reduced to a body only, to be only in the passive voice, with people who are trying to help, and are very sorry to hurt, but hurt they must.

At the beginning of September, on Labor Day itself I had a painful, exhausting twelve-hour emergency room visit as a result of an IUD placed two weeks prior. I had not been prepared for the rigors of medical care that day. I wasn't prepared for the IV that went in on maybe the third or fourth try, for being tethered to a bed I had been wheeled to struggling to text with one

hand because moving my hand that the IV was hooked to was too painful. I wasn't ready for the parade of faces in and out of the room. I wasn't ready for the friend who brought me to the hospital to leave the room and not come back. I wasn't ready for the pain that had brought me there. I had been having coffee with a friend, and when I stood up I was seized with pelvic pain at a 9/10. I told my friend about the existence of the IUD because she needed to know if I passed out on the fifteen minute ride home.

*

While the cute photo from September annoyed me, I was also into it. My friends saw me. I saw me. I saw me as one who is sass, who is confidence, who is femme, as one who laughs. And so, I've begun taking selfies this year. Me in a coffee shop looking into the light after my hair was just cut. Me with unwashed hair on election night 2018 holding so much anxiety waiting to discover if Democrats would maybe take the House. Me with my friend Helen at a women's college basketball game.

During September and October when I was first posting selfies regularly I was again talking with the man who had been the impetus for me requesting an IUD. I'll call him Richard. He and I had met almost six months previously through a friend, we'd spent that time dancing around each other, talking most of the night every night. Still sometimes I grow silent, sometimes he does. When he takes me out it's elaborate, thought out, sometimes fancy. He's uniquely problematic, but also compelling. I didn't call him from the ER. I had grown tired of a streak towards words that stunned me, painted me into corners, and twisted my definition of myself into the unrecognizable. His explanations offered included distraction and talk of sex, but more importantly, a claim that one person in a couple might be having fun, even if the other wasn't. I hadn't given much thought to the strategy of this break up. He immediately told me it wasn't over. I didn't bother to argue figuring that disengagement was the most mature response I was capable of. He was back in early September having messaged me five days after the ER visit telling me he'd be at my show. I was too tired to protest. I did eventually get strategic. I did eventually use the trump card, the one that works on a legalistic person, "I don't want to see you again. Please don't contact me."

At the follow up appointment from that hospital visit my gyn first apologized for how terrible my experience with the IUD had been. She then told me she wanted to do an endometrial biopsy because my bleeding pattern for the two weeks it had been in, and in the four days it had been out was abnormal. I declined. I walked out of her office, and went home and back to bed. That sort of thing, of course, stays in your head. I told no one. Then I went to a friend's party. One friend I had not seen in a long time told me she had just finished breast cancer treatment, and another told me she was caring for a friend dying of ovarian cancer. Two days later, late at night on the phone, I told Richard whose problematic side I was again ignoring that my gynecologist wanted me to have an endometrial biopsy, and I was scared, scared of the

result. Two nights later, in the midst of this same conversation once again, he tells me to take a picture of the fear. He tells me to compare that picture to the feeling I will have when I am told I don't have cancer. I start thinking of taking pictures of feelings as another way to make a self portrait.

Am I wrong to allow a parallel to exist between myself, a human being, and the Velveteen Rabbit, a toy in a children's book? Perhaps it's an explicable confusion? Perhaps Richard—and others—were cruel to me, chose to hurt me because they didn't see me as real? Perhaps I am a toy in his world just as I was a soft object to the man who battered me? Perhaps I see myself as not real because my hurt has always been incomprehensible to me? Perhaps if I tell of my hurt in the most straightforward of ways, as I have done in parts of this essay, I, too, will be real?

III. Theorizing the Selfie

Selfies are also self-portraits. I started engaging with the critiques of, the ideology of, the theorizing of the selfie. And isn't memoir, isn't personal storytelling, another way of making a self-portrait? I began to think of self-portraits as a way to claim one's body and as a way to craft identity. As a way to remove oneself from the body in pain, the body that could die, the body under careful observation. A way to not be the body as meat, as product, even if the body still becomes digital object. It is a way to construct a self that is so multitudinous it can't be typecast. The only way out is holding the camera up at oneself until one has a dizzying array of selves, a dizzying array of self-productions, and an array of mental pictures that sometimes contradict, but that provide a scaffolding big enough for a self.



Alison Bergblom Johnson is a writer, artist, and

performer currently living in Minneapolis. Flock, Spout Press, and Minnesota Public Radio, among others, have published her work. Her art and performance project, *Open Letters to the Men of Craigslist*, has received attention from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *MinnPost*. She has an affinity with the color blue, makes pesto from scratch, and values community. Find her on the web at alisonberglomjohnson.com