

WOVEN: Grace

written by Guest Contributor | December 4, 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.

Image Credit: Hans Velasquez

I.

I used to watch my mother shave her legs in the bathtub. I was in love with the action. The way she bent her legs, laid her back against the tub's lip, cat-posed her spine in order to achieve the best reach from her top half to her bottom—it wooed me the same way the rainbows hidden in sad gasoline puddles did. I watched her do a lot of things; it was transcendental, watching her navigate her body like she owned it. I'd felt then- as I do still, every now and again—alienated from my body. I wanted the ballerina-grace she exhibited in delicately pulling those blades across her skin.

Perhaps that's the word I most attributed to womanhood then: grace. Grace in the way she plucked her eyebrows, wincing in a slow, measured metric; grace in the smell of her perfume, which I'd seek when she wasn't home, opening her closet door and inhaling; grace in the black wool robe she wore on Christmas morning, and how compatible a coffee cup looked in her hand; grace, even, in the box I once found in our bathroom closet, a douche, never opened, the box covered with dust.

In my own bathtub, I can never get the bubbles as symmetrical and glorious as my mother once did. I never possess the calmness she did after exiting the bath; instead, I'm overheated, exasperated, unsexy. My legs never look as perfectly positioned as hers did, her knees mounted atop the suds.

When we moved in to our apartment in Los Angeles, my boyfriend and I took a bath together. Something about the marijuana we smoked, the couch we just bought, our clothes hanging together in the closet- we sat in the stiff water laughing at how incompatible our bodies were for the shape of the tub until we pruned.

It wasn't quite grace. But it was something.

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In an article from 2017 titled "7 Shower Sex Problems and How to Fix Them for Good," *Cosmopolitan* magazine identifies some real problems. The final, monstrous problem? The inability to have successful penetrative sex, period. Forget the water and soap in the eyes problem, the "which angle do I need to contort into without falling" problem—it's just hard to have sex in water. *Cosmo* recommends playing with other intimacies, especially hand stuff, while in the shower.

A wonderful recommendation. There are few things hotter, in my experience, than a makeout session in warm water, than a finger tracing water down your nipple, down your navel.

As a teenager, I watched *America's Next Top Model* obsessively. My favorite modeling shoots in the show were the ones that involved water- I especially loved watching the uncaged water fall into open mouths. Often, in my own shower, I'd open my closed eyes while my head was under the stream of water, open them slowly and seductively, as if this one motion could communicate just how full of grace I was. My teenage years were sloppy kisses on our glass shower walls, formations I trained my lips to figure themselves into. I was a girl hellbent on training herself into the grace of womanhood.

I wish I wouldn't think of a different kind of shower when I read this innocuous *Cosmopolitan* article. I'd have liked showers to remain unflinchingly sexy, a moving throne on which to espouse my grace for all to see.

But that other shower, a cold shower, in the middle of a northeast Ohio winter- it remains. The forceful entry of him into me as my mouth gaped open in shock, water falling uncaged again into my mouth—it remains.

Earlier this year I texted my friend and told her, "I think I was raped." She said, "I think you were, too."

II.

I haven't found that grace I expected to find in womanhood. Maybe it'll come at age thirty, that abstract round number I've pinned some expectation of adulthood on. Right now, though, I'm clumsy. Everything feels heavy in my arms, and I still haven't perfected how to properly juggle a gym bag, lunch bag, and purse into work. More often than not the lunch bag is saturated with some type of liquid from whichever container I haven't properly closed.

And where is the grace in cystic acne? In \$140 skincare products bought out of desperation. Or in vows to god(s) never to pick my face again, only to cry in front of the bathroom mirror an hour later, pointer fingers dotted with blood and puss.

When I got my IUD earlier this year, my doctor explained, after I writhed on the table during the insertion, that the pain I'd felt was "one fourth" of a contraction. Grace? How?

I told my boyfriend recently that I think there's a way to still be sad when you're happy. I think both of us mourn the loss of getting our hearts broken, of smoking cigarettes and having an excuse to self poison. Of wallowing in a bed you don't share with anyone else.

In "The Bourne Identity," a song written by Alex Turner for his band *The Last Shadow Puppets*, Turner sings:

*I caught you talking to the real me
Can't tell you how unhappy that shit makes me
If you hear him calling, promise you'll ignore him
He's kind of my enemy
Whenever I'm on to something good you see
He always waltzes in to spoil it for me*

My boyfriend tells me this song should have been in his Bumble profile when we met. A kind of forewarning.

And it's true—I've known this about him for years. There are lyrics, poems I could have used, too. Desperate romanticisms, paranoias.

It still astonishes me, though, how desperate he and I are to be sad.

That night I thought the man I'd been dating (let's call him Tom) would park, walk into the bar, buy my friends a round of drinks. Instead, he called me when he was outside. His front tire splayed over the curb. His windshield wipers barely worked—they eeked across the glass like a premonition.

Later, after he'd fallen asleep, I waited for my friends to pick me up. I sat outside and watched the long pieces of hair on the left side of my face crystalize into small iceicles. I laughed, because when I was a child, I loved this phenomenon; wetting my hair and then playing in the snow, transforming myself into some kind of ethereal snow witch.

I didn't love it anymore.

My mother doesn't complain when she cooks. She smiles when I'm home and I ask her to go to Swenson's for me, even after she's driven past it fifteen miles in the other direction. She does not seem burdened with the monotony of life.

Yesterday I washed my makeup brushes and this morning they were still wet. I'm not equipped with the patience or the knowledge of how to dry them.

What else?

One of my best friends fingering me in the backseat of someone's car even after I'd swatted his hand away more than once, ten of us packed into a van, off to some kind of after party. The bar afterward, the light apology he gave over text a few days later, and the response I had typed out but didn't send. The friendship we still have.

There's the cave I walked through, hunched over, on the southern border of Bulgaria, and the man who walked behind me, his hands rubbing the backs of my thighs. There's the darkness and the wetness of the cave and the taste of fuzzy red wine and the thrill of being somewhere else. There's the dismissal that came afterward, the laugh I gave in retelling the story to my friends back home, the details I left out, like the trembling of my legs after I emerged from the cave, the suffocation, the sadness.

There's more.

I feel violated by my womanhood every time I burn my finger on my curling iron. How'd my mother hide this ugliness so well?

Another question: which men touched her when she didn't want to be touched? What were their names?

I thought it was over when we exited the shower. Instead, Tom's body pinned me, stomach down, against the bed. His barely-erect penis ignored my body's clench, and I closed my eyes, telling myself that he was my boyfriend, *boyfriend!*, as if that made me immune from the reality of what was happening.

Somehow the earring I'd worn that night fell out, made its way beside me on the bed. It was sharp. I pressed my palm into the pointy back, wincing and smiling at the same time. I appreciated it. I appreciated a pain I could choose.

III.

Every night I eat globs of peanut butter and then globs of raspberry jelly. I use the same spoon, dipping ceremoniously into each jar. Oftentimes I'm high-sometimes I'm not.

I like being disgusting. Forgetting to shave the right side of my pussy makes me laugh.

Did you hear that? It makes me laugh.

It makes me

laugh.



Erika Gallion is a Los Angeles-based writer. Originally from Canton, Ohio, Gallion writes about place and the inherited trauma places can inadvertently bestow upon us. She writes creative nonfiction and fiction, and is working on a book-length essay collection. Other publications can be found at *Entropy*, *Angel City Review*, *Women's Review of Books*, and more.