

WOVEN: In Defense of Sound

written by Guest Contributor | September 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.

The doors open to music and soft lighting. To light grey walls and machines. Inordinately warm, I take my clothes off and fold them neatly on a swivel chair. The paper gown I place around my shoulders, open to the front. I could be here for a spa treatment. For a facial or a massage. The quiet is disconcerting. It rings in my bones. Maybe it speaks of what's to come. What I have to fear.

It is October 2018.

The ultrasound machine sits in the corner, a strange galaxy beyond the bed. I lay my body down. I wait. A slight woman enters, but makes little sound. She sits in front of the machine and opens the gown.

She slathers my breasts with warm jelly, asking, "Are you okay?"

As she moves the wand over my left breast, pushing down hard, the pain begins. Searing. Something worse than fear. Something worse than the machine's bleating.

*

I had a miscarriage a few days after my oldest son's first birthday in 2007,

after he smeared blue icing in his hair, on the rug, across the house to the bathtub. A friend of mine helped me bathe him. I hadn't known I was pregnant. It was early. I had only taken five tests, those pink lines still opaque. Still undecided. Still present.

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In 2019, "Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, and Utah passed new antiabortion bills, and similar measures are pending in other states," according to *The Washington Post*. This attack on *Roe V. Wade* comes forty-six years after the landmark decision gave women the lawful right to choose what happens to their bodies concerning pregnancy. These "heartbeat bills" in Alabama and Georgia have generated fear that even miscarriage after the sixth week of pregnancy will be deemed a jailable offense in that women will be responsible for proving the presence of a miscarriage.

Essentially, women will have to prove the existence of something that does not exist.

This is how war enters a woman.

*

2017: Gulls flit low over the water. The sun, mid-sky at 4pm. I shift my feet back and forth in the sand, soft grit clinging to my legs. The rest of me, hollow.

In the shower earlier, I drained. Blood. Spectre. Silence. Sorrow. The stark edges of sound. These hollows, fled by fiberglass wings and knots of tissue and what could have been.

It's the day after my birthday. My boys, seven and nine, build sandcastles and play in the waves with their friends. It's the beginning of April on the Gulf, just south of Safety Harbor. The rainy season is upon us. I have no idea how to feel, or how to feel full.

*

They say a woman may have many miscarriages in her life. Losses we know nothing about. Darwinist, the walls of the womb. These shadows.

I haven't been on birth control since my wedding in 2003. In all that time,

only two children have stayed.

I know how lucky I am. I do.

*

Upon releasing the song "Polly" in 1991, Kurt Cobain reportedly stated that he was frustrated by public response to a song written about a real sexual assault. A self-proclaimed feminist, his frustration was that the point was missed and the popularity of the song further exacerbated this disconnect between women's rights and the horror and disgust Cobain felt at the news article that prompted the song. Some people felt the song was too dark and didn't like the content. Others felt it glorified rape. In response, he wrote "Rape Me," a song that appeared on Nirvana's 1993 album, titled *In Utero*. If people weren't ready for a song to spur discussions about rape, he wanted to restate the forced resilience of women in the face of sexual assault with "Rape Me," telling *Spin Magazine*, "It's like she's saying, 'Rape me, go ahead, rape me, beat me. You'll never kill me. I'll survive this . . .'"

What he didn't say was how. Or why anyone should have to.

In 2016, in Steubenville, Ohio, a young woman was raped at a house party by two boys on the local high school football team. On Twitter, their friends shared pictures of the assault and referenced the song, "Rape Me."

Were she impregnated as a result of rape in 2020, she might not have the right to an abortion in Ohio if she were to find out after 6 weeks, at which point most women are still symptomless.

The initial public response to the case online was that she was an immoral girl who was trying to trap the boys. She'd been passed out at the time. She didn't even remember them being inside her, let alone being sodomized as their friends laughed and took pictures.

*

The pain in my breasts persists through the night now. All night, the ache of something I can't see. They are slightly swollen. There are lumps that I know are cysts. I sleep in a sports bra. I don't sleep on my stomach. I wake up in pain anyway. They didn't find cancer. I'm trying to feel lucky.

My doctor says cysts are common in women in their late thirties, early forties. I should manage them with diet: less caffeine and sugar will help.

I'm tired all the time from not sleeping. From worry.

My ten year-old still needs me to lay down with him at night. I think about need. How it forces me to leave myself. The prairie wind slashes through houses.

We are back in Alberta now, the plains swept clean.

*

I was born in the shadows of *Roe v. Wade*, though I'm not sure I was ever aware that there was a time that we could not have safe abortions in Canada. My friends got abortions. We had access to the morning-after pill from the free clinic when we were in high school. Sometimes, it was used because someone got drunk and made a mistake. Sometimes, this access saved lives.

*

Sitting in the doctor's office, grey with panic, my heart beats in my throat. Or maybe that's the heartburn, already present. Already making the fetus known.

The doctor enters. She is young, with long onyx hair. She smiles, "Do you remember your last period?"

I sit back. I have no idea. Was it January? Or February, when we stayed at that hotel in Red Deer for a hockey tournament? It was in one of those hotels on one of those tournament weekends.

I explain. "I have to go for ultrasounds every six months to monitor the cysts in my breasts. They were sore and swollen already. My period is always irregular. I work a lot. I coach my kids. I'm always tired. I thought it was the flu."

She smiles again. "Don't worry. You have lots of time to decide what to do. We'll run a test to see if the baby is healthy, after an ultrasound to determine how pregnant you are. We have until the twenty-fourth week, if the test comes back positive for fetal abnormalities. Or if, given your age, we find any reason to fear for your health. I'm sure it will be fine. I have patients as old as forty-eight. You might just have young eggs."

I walk out of that sterile white office into the April sun. It is cool, but clear. It has rained. All I smell is petrichor. A warning. What came before, what comes after.

*

The tiniest baby in the world who has survived to-date is Saybie, a little girl born at twenty-three weeks and three days in San Diego, California, in December 2018. She spent five months in the NICU, weighing only 8.6 ounces at birth, or the same amount as a small apple.

It is possible that a child will live after being born in the second trimester. That we will get to call her a child, rather than a fetus. Rather than a statistic.

*

My paternal grandmother's oldest son was stillborn. She didn't know that he stopped living inside her until he was born. Labouring in work kitchens and taking care of her husband, she was already near forty when she finally got pregnant the first time. She had no access to an ultrasound, as I do now.

My second son never moved very often in utero. When I started spotting heavily at thirty-two weeks, I went three days without feeling him move. I tried not to breathe too hard. Not to move. To listen. To speak. To eat anything that would make him wake. There were more periods like this as the last weeks wore on. I grew quiet. I grew into myself. I willed him to live. I flew across continents to get back to my doctor who listened to his heart and assured me he was fine.

I feel my daughter move inside me now. I am always listening.

*

Who wants to know if they will have to outlive their children?

When I enter an ultrasound lab, they ask me how many pregnancies I've had and I don't know. I answer five or six, but I'm not sure. I don't know how to count losses when the loss is something I feel, but can't see, my own *history round[ing] off skeletons to zero*.

Is emptiness the only thing I have to measure myself by?

*

It is late summer, 2019. We've lived in Canada for a year, after living in the U.S. for twenty years. I have free health care, access to a year of maternity leave, and decision-making power over my body. Republican voters and politicians have waged a war on women's bodies in the US, under the guise of a right to life argument. But who's right to live? And how? And who decides?

My youngest son rests his hand on my belly. My daughter stills at his touch. He has yet to feel her move. But I do. At this age, at this stage in my life, at this risk, with these years and degrees and a career and family behind me, I do. Twenty years ago, I couldn't have said that. Twenty years ago, I was a stupid kid who thought sex was love. Who missed my father enough to look for him in others. Who was reckless and sorry.

For years, I wanted to disappear. In high school, I lost thirty pounds. I was a wisp of an almost-woman. I was cold, even in the heat. My hair grew white in patches. I drank too much. My mother's boyfriend told me I deserved whatever happened to me.

How is it always easier to believe the lie?

*

The doors soften to grey. It is quiet. I hear nothing. My daughter is doing somersaults inside me. She is the wind that I hide. When the technician arrives, she will be heard by the ultrasound, along with the cysts, the future, the sighs of our living cells.

I am thirty weeks pregnant, due just before Halloween.

My fear of the future has not abated. I'm not sure anyone is ever ready for the responsibility of a child.

I'm tired. It's been a long year. But I have hope. It looks like a soft grey room, too warm. A kind woman who touches me, gently. A country where I am safe. A body that won't fail.

I try not to fall asleep to the sound of the machines bleating. The screen, overhead, teaching me about myself. Following sound to its source. Tracking the time it will take to reach me.



Chelsea Dingman's first book, *Thaw*, was chosen by Allison Joseph to win the National Poetry Series (University of Georgia Press, 2017). Her second poetry collection, *Through a Small Ghost*, won The Georgia Poetry Prize and is forthcoming from the University of Georgia Press (February, 2020). She is also the author of the chapbook, *What Bodies Have I Moved* (Madhouse Press, 2018). Her work is forthcoming in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The American Poetry Review*, among others. Visit her website: chelseadingman.com.