

WOVEN: My Body; La Horrible

written by Guest Contributor | November 3, 2021



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.

Reread the [archives](#), always.

To get my therapist to understand how bad things are, I tell her during 3 sessions that I feel like I'm living inside of a horror movie. I keep hoping to convey some urgency, a combination of words that will motivate Jen to rescue me from myself. I don't know what I want if not to be saved. Jen loves me but I demand proof of her concern.

In truth, the simile will not make me any safer. There is too much space within the synapses. A trauma history told in acts. A trauma history told in definitive expanses of time, the past I have escaped and the present. Really, everything is always at once. I am on the bus with a friend and my abuser rides beside us. I am at Starbucks and swear he's the man making my coffee. I walk my dogs down the block and he watches my every move from a bench.

All my hypervigilance and paranoia are the symptoms of a brain rewritten. I am possessed by all the echoes. In the bathroom, I hear my mother screaming my name. The pounding knocks on my door. The clashing yells of my parents and the heavy clang of impact, of pan against tile. My abuser, once just a man, turns into a poltergeist—an ever-present and unpredictable apparition. His vast power feels too much like I'm being punished.

Imagining my abuser as a ghost only brings me comfort because it mandates he is dead.

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When I was a kid I used to make up games to protect myself. If I could make it to my apartment before the vestibule door slammed shut, nothing would follow me. If I didn't look directly into the shadows of the hallway, there couldn't be anything too awful within them. Turn on the lights if you keep hearing things. Always move quickly when you walk alone.

Reality bends under heat. The smog of my breath under tucked blankets. The heat on my glasses, the heat on my shitty iPad screen. I've always felt cursed. You don't need sublime divination to hear the words of the dead. You don't even need to ask. Trauma is not something anyone chooses and yet. Hands are hands pried open. A closet is a closet until the lights are turned off.

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The first haunted house was in Brooklyn. There are some stories I've heard since age 7. I know them by heart: Cigarette smoke emanating from the baby room, unexplained sounds, the swaying of an empty rocking chair. In my memory, dreams of snakes and fist-sized spiders climbing all over me. My nana tells me that when I was a baby, a blue and restless thing, I wailed most nights. She dripped oil over my forehead for protection and prayed beside me.

Also in that house: the crazy nanny. The nanny who had to be let go because she frightened me so. Some stories are complicated over time. My mother, over a wine glass one afternoon, reveals to me my babysitter's boyfriend as a looming figure. A man who spent a little too much time with me and who I complained about. "Snakes" becomes a cruel metaphor. When I cry, Mom assures me that she took me to the doctor to check if anything had happened. This is supposed to feel like a relief.

"Babe, don't worry! I told you, it's all okay."

I learn to grieve all the pain I remember but what to do with all that I don't? I will never know what happened.

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There are the two apartments on either side of Battery Park. My parents divorce during our last year on the northside. I don't believe my father is the devil. Not a demon but surely something evil I have been subjected to. As

if some changeling, some wicked form of tree stems and twine has been swapped in place for what a father should be. I hear him hit her. I hear the screams. Everything is messily hidden and the morning after one particularly bad Thanksgiving, Dad apologizes to my brother and me and tells us it's not okay to hit women.

I watch as my mother instructs my dad to call me pretty and hug me from time to time. His attempts at loving me feel awkward—brutal and sporadic. But we are so good at conserving public appearances. So good at playing the token African American family. I almost believe the facade, that love is painful and terrific. Love is a commitment you cannot break free from.

My mother tells me to never marry a man like my father and I promise I will try.

In the first Battery Park apartment, Noah and I share a bedroom divided by a tall screen. I don't think he knows when I cry but I can hear him sometimes. I climb into his bed with a flashlight and we read fantasy stories. We are always imagining ways out of ourselves, inventing lives where we are chosen. The bathroom sink we share is crusted with age-old layers of toothpaste and spit. For 3 weeks, tiny white bugs fly up from the sink no matter how much bleach I drown them with.

I dream of being groped in my bed night after night. The figure never has a face but I know the feeling of its breath, its hands. When we move again and Dad leaves, I cast a protection spell. The dreams mostly stop and are replaced with other terrors.

The new haunted house is empty most of the time. Mom works tirelessly and Noah has developed into that biting adolescence where he hates me, hates Mom. He only yearns for Dad who doesn't want him. I don't have many friends, symbiotic of a severe social anxiety disorder, so I insert men into my life in a methodical way. I realize I am not ugly and that I can maybe even be loved.

I only recognize now knowing I'm lesbian how little the substance of these men mattered, only that they were men, only that they wanted me. I am 16 when I am sexually and physically abused by a boy my age. He is my first boyfriend and thus my world, harming me with all of the recklessness of youth. The first time he chokes me out without warning, pushing me down onto the living room sofa, he tells me: "you look like the kind of girl who likes this". I try to become.

My body is well trained in endurance. If it hurts, and it will hurt, clench your teeth. Bite down on your tongue. Focus on other sensations. Perform. How hard can you crush something until it breaks? I am raped more times than I can count and only the first time I cry. This turns into my boyfriend crying, turns into comforting him for hours on end while he blubbers promises of marriage and children with his name. What can this body withstand?

I carry my shame deep within my bones, not because I am being abused but because I've had sex. For 9 months I am his bitch and his whore. A good girl

that wears bruises under a private school uniform. When he abandons me, I don't leave bed for 2 days. I give the promise ring away to a random woman for free.

A year later, on New Year's Eve, I tell my mother what happened to me. She asks why didn't I ever say anything? How could I not realize? Rape didn't just happen to me; it happened to the family. But all I can see are empty rooms and hands only I have known. Besides, I am already dating the next man who I am sure will kill me.

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My mother survived the haunted house too so I make excuses. Try to rationalize. A victim raising a victim raising a good God-loving daughter. Why was I allowed to date a 21-year-old man when I was 17? Why did no one protect me?

These haunted houses where I was abused behind locked doors. These haunted houses where I was deprived of sleep and berated for entire nights. These haunted houses that I still must sleep in where she cooked for my abuser and consoled him and treated him like a son.

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Most of the ghosts that have followed me have been men. A year after leaving my abuser, too much sticks. Trauma injury memories: a stress in my pelvic bowl, an ache in my hip, the feeling of hands crushing my ribcage. Also, the fear of men over 6'0, the fear of thin men in white baseball caps, the fear of someone standing by my bed watching as I sleep, the fear of someone waiting to kill me outside of my apartment building.

I don't want to write about N. I wish I didn't have to. It's been a year. A year of recovery post psych ward. A year of group therapy and new medication and DBT skills. A year since I escaped which barely felt possible and took months of planning. A year since I had to beg his sister to make him leave me alone so he would stop coming to my house. A year of CPTSD and clinging to its name as if it too shall be ripped from my hands.

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I want to tell you I was younger than his youngest brother. I want to tell

you about his jealous rages which had no reason or bound. I want to tell you about how I had no friends in college, only him. Only this man, 21 and then 22, who laid in my dorm room and controlled my entire life with a motion of his thumb. I want to tell you about the softening drugs that made me feel like he was the most beautiful person in the world. I want to tell you how ugly he was and how through every loop of his delusional mind I tried so hard to make it okay.

And of course, there are the things I don't tell anyone about. The parts I wish I could cut from my body. Had things been different, had my cunt not been the one he drowned with spit and pretended was his mothers. Had he not fucked me in my grandmother's house. Had he not gotten off on the smallness of my body beneath his hands. Had he not raped me the first night he ever touched me. Had he not.

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Yoga is good for PTSD so I stretch till I cry. I am learning how to relate to my body outside of his grasp. Coaxing my own strained muscles and skin. Imagining myself not within a designed nude image but real and still here. Not dead, not yet.

Child's pose still feels too vulnerable. I am so scared of the submission of my body. The knees I have kissed and the men who have hated me who I trusted and almost loved. The body, the body, the body. This is my body and it never forgets so I must heal, must learn how to make this weathered place a home. There is no void where I am not who this happened to and still I must survive.

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My favorite ghost is the sweet ghost of my youth. My inner child, the 4-eyed daughter who I spent so much time hating. The shy thing who I have buried all my loathing into. I have had to undo so much of my self-blame. I was 17. I was 16. I was a child. I was raised an ugly girl. I just wanted to be seen, embraced. All love felt so radical and underserved, even abuse in all its cruelty.

And my relationships with men were not random feats, nor anything I just suddenly chose for myself. *Why didn't you say anything?* I didn't know. I couldn't know. And maybe if you had been raised in that same blur of trauma, been born to the same beloved beasts. Maybe if you had known that darkness can make a bookcase look like a father, can turn a closet into a tomb. Maybe you too would confuse evil for a type of kindness before it was too late.

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At YoungArts Miami 2017, I am 16 and frightening. I read creative nonfiction on stage about my body, about the men that leer at me on the street, about a legion of girls I carry close to my heart. I write like I am on fire without any question. I want to make something. I want to be something that is not just a wife. In Miami, my phone never quiets. My first abuser berates me each day, minute by minute. Calls me a bitch on my last day there and I forgive him.

Sometimes I cry for that girl. All the plans in my brain that have shifted. I wanted so much and dreamed of so much. After the first abusive relationship, I applied to college, got good grades, and was still a kind-hearted daughter. But that is gone. I can no longer pretend or maintain for my parents' sake. I must heal for myself.

For a long time, my mother doesn't understand why I can't just move on. Bad things happen every day. She, like I, was raised to swallow her pain, to tuck it behind her molars. Even though I have made so much progress in my recovery, I am still constantly mourning. Who might I have been free from all this? Nothing can be undone. Every day I must try and fail to dodge the mines of my memory. Every day I must tolerate all which is embedded within me. My small ghost, my good girl. I surely couldn't live like you forever. I had to learn to be reborn. I had to die to become. I used to be so promising; I hope I still can be.

Brianne Allen (they/she) is a writer from New York City and a student at the New School. They were named a 2019 National YoungArts Finalist in Writing and have additionally been recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. They have been published in places such as *The Forge Literary Magazine*, Third Point Press, and *Rookie Magazine*.
