

WOVEN: Only Afterwards Don't Anyone Stand Close To An Open Window*

written by Guest Contributor | July 24, 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.

** Title taken from *You Don't Know What Love Is (An Evening With Charles Bukowski)* by Raymond Carver*

Ten years ago? I do not know it is a date. Later you tell me about female students who are your friends, like sisters or daughters. I wonder why I could not have been one of them. I even ask you this, years later, the last time you consent to conversation. Why was that not me?

This first time I meet you off-campus to talk about writing, maybe the first time I've gone to Center City alone—sweating newness and womanhood. Maybe my third or fourth sit-down dinner that isn't Olive Garden. You buy me pasta and have a glass of wine at noon, which I have never seen anyone do and I am thrilled. Too nervous to eat I take the full portion home in a little box. I remember almost nothing of the conversation but I remember the panels of light. I remember thinking I was doing so well, how smart you must find me. Eighteen in my first semester and you say my papers are already graduate level. What a progressive mind.

Even this first time I believe you mention your father, then your book, then your girlfriend who is living somewhere else. Maybe California which makes me think she must be tall and busty and blonde. You are the same age as my father but so different. So alive. You were charismatic and charming in the

classroom but now to have this all to myself? It is unbearable. That you should find me clever and grown-up enough to spend this hour with.

You take the train back to campus with me and we sit side by side. At first I am focused on trying not to allow my body to touch your body in any way. An inch between us. So as not to offend. But then I am focused on trying to find something to say. You have stopped talking.

I am wearing a mini-skirt. I feel a mass on my knee. It is you. It is your hand. Not just my knee, my thigh. The inside of my thigh.

I want to die. It is not exaggeration. Nausea and fear that overwhelms me, heightened due to my youth, as strong as I have ever felt it. Writing this now I feel it. Panic. The desire to vomit up not just the content of one's stomach but one's very ability to perceive, to exercise one's very life force. I do nothing. I am frozen. You leave the hand there; I cannot remember how long. I am captive. The pasta sitting on my lap covering my crotch. I am grateful for the protection.

Arriving on campus you ask if I would like to go back to your office. I would not. I would like to go to my 7-11 and buy candy bars and do my homework with the television on loud. I would like to shower. I would like to be far away from both our bodies, existing only in a cerebral dimension.

But I do not say no. It is such a generous invitation after all. I switch. Here I question myself. You do not coerce me. You have suggested to me how things will proceed, and I am not as ignorant or stupid as all that. I must know what will happen. And I change my mind. Maybe I cannot bear the terror so I make it an adventure. We go back to your office.

In the elevator, we stand behind another of my English professors, a gentle older man. He smiles at me and watches as I get off with you. I tell myself he cannot know, but the memory haunts me for the next four years as I take several more classes with him. I wonder if he guesses our secret.

In the office, you leave the door cracked open for appearances. I feel sickly envious at the academic squalor. I sit across from you and every time I sit across from someone in this way I have this memory. Visceral. In therapists' offices and at job interviews and when I enter an MFA and meet with my thesis advisors. So that I blush sometimes. So that I cannot open my mouth or else it will be taken wrong. So I grow irrationally angry. When I meet with my own students, it is always in public, always with a table between us, so that they are protected.

We sit like this, student and teacher, and you touch my knees again. You pull out a flask. Would you like a drink? I shake my head. No. I don't want to get in trouble. I say this. You say I thought you liked to drink. My high-school suspension must have been a topic of conversation over lunch. I do, I say, I am a very good drinker. I say this. You say no one will know. I cannot remember if I have a drink but I know you do. You smell like it. This memory is whiskey and old books and Spring air from the open window so if someone were tall enough they could see in.

You pull me onto your lap. Pull. I remember sitting on your lap but I do not remember how I got there. In memory I seem so small but I do not know what I felt at the time. Maybe bloated and red and oversized as I often feel. Maybe afraid of you seeing me close up. Maybe just sick. When I see this image I see someone younger than her age. How odd and wrong it seems in memory and how commonplace it might have been—my naked legs resting on one of your thighs. I remember this now still, the door open, or did you close it? Eighteen when we met but now nineteen. So an adult.

Reading this I am afraid of you laughing. Nineteen and thirty-eight (I believe). Not so bad at all. Not the biggest age gap in my life. Not the most egregious imbalance of power. And I such a robust nineteen and experienced and convinced of my adulthood. Then why? And reading do you think me a snowflake, that this should haunt me, terrify me, become a concrete part of my identity. That of ingenue. That of temptress. When I was looking for someone to see me. How much harder its made it to believe myself human.

I remember now you are not even my teacher. It is spring semester and I took your class in the fall. Why did you email me? Why did I respond. Yahoo will not let me access my account—and I try—two days of calling and emailing. All dust then. So even more reason for you, reader, to see this as a love affair. Two consenting adults. Laugh me off this page for suggesting anything different.

When I go home, I cry. I tell my roommate who tells me sternly to not be that girl. I tell the boy I am sleeping with who tells me to ignore you—but he leaves me soon after and I forget to take his advice. I think I tell my ex-boyfriend from high-school. He laughs. I showed him the poem you gave me in class however many months before, the Carver in which Bukowski drinks and fucks his student and does not rhyme and is not romantic. He says he knew then.

Then. Why didn't I?

The next time we meet I do not know but I imagine it will be sex. I am not as young as all that. You are not the first older man who has sat me on their lap. So why then am I nervous? Why then am I not certain? What am I holding out for? Do you see how unreliable I am as narrator? Are you already irritated, bored? Why is this a story I so feel needs telling?

I spend my student loan money on lingerie. A seventy dollar padded bra I still have today, a decade old but mostly unused. Stockings. You tell me you liked watching me uncross my legs in miniskirts and stockings in class. I am startled to learn I was being watched.

But see, I must have known how this night would be.

Still, I remember and I do not think I was certain.

You take it for granted that I know how to eat out. You buy a bottle of wine for the table on a little patio near the train station. I mimic how you hold the glass, I do not know if I had held one before. You live in the suburbs

and I am conscious on the train that when I arrive I will be trapped if we stay out too late. I order a salad but I cannot eat it. I've taken laxatives all week so you will think I am beautiful. So I will fit into my new denim skirt which I have bought, will buy, to impress you. Do I wear it for this meeting or later? I am only 98 lbs but still we struggle to get it off me. A single lettuce leaf would disrupt my empty system which I have made sterile for you. I drink. You talk.

Partway through the night, I do not know when—I remember now how readily you would touch me, on my bare shoulders, my hands, gestures of affection I had not been shown with this level of authority—you tell me, you say it gently asking for my permission without explicitly asking, that you have booked a room at a bed and breakfast nearby.

I am nervous to be naked in front of you, that you will be disappointed. I am used to fucking but I have just started dating senior undergraduates who want to go slow, who want to look at me rather than push me onto their cock in an empty parking lot. So I am prepared, but I am terrified as you undress me, cursing as you do—angrily but with what I recognize is pleasure at what you are seeing, which is my essence, my shell, my secret. I lie down on the bed.

I don't know what else to do. Unmarked and small, I am scandalized by the memory of this and cannot fathom how you could bear to touch it. How did it not burn to the touch. How are you not scarred from the scalding heat of its youth.

And then you undress yourself.

I have never seen a man as old as you without clothes on, and your body disgusts me. I am sorry even now to offend, but it does. Your body frightens me. You have more weight to you than I knew and it is all around the middle and arms. Your cock is still flaccid. It is summer and you have been sweating all night, your body slick with it. The lights are on and you are red and hairy and covered in moles. You are not like the men, even the older men, I have seen. You are big and old and I am already naked on the bed and have already consented to this but feel abject horror at the thought of you near me, inside of me.

I think you kiss me.

You try to eat me but I am scandalized at the thought. That you should see even more of me. That you might feel revulsion at the taste of me, the same revulsion that I feel at the sight of you. I do not remember all the steps. I remember you on top of me in missionary, crushing me, not the adept lover I'd been anticipating but clumsier than a teen. I am dry and you offer lube. I interpret it as insult. I am cold but after you are done and in the bathroom I have to wipe your sweat off of my body. There are dark marks on the duvet. You do not last long but it is ages as I try to find the room to breathe from under you. Thinking of you in my belly.

Afterwards though, you hold me gratefully and I feel wanted and endeared to you again, shocked that you would choose me. We go out for more wine. I feel

beautiful when I am drunk and feeling beautiful improves my mood. There is a wedding at the hotel that weekend. The weather is perfect and the moon is full and there is a decorated patio made up for the happy couple. Empty though. The party moved elsewhere, but still music is playing.

You dance with me. And despite all this I still find that moment beautifully romantic, like a movie. A perfect story. We sway and I fit against you. I feel so lucky.

We go back to the room.

My mother once told me a story about her honeymoon. She was sixteen and my father eighteen. A gorgeous young couple. They went to a ski-lodge to celebrate after the ceremony which was attended by nearly the entire high school, so crowded that they ran out of food within an hour. I do not know what compelled my mother to tell me this, we are not close, but she was not happy on the honeymoon. She woke up in the middle of the night and missed her family, her home. She was still a child sleeping in a bed with a man, even one she had chosen, even one almost as young as she—and she said, maybe not in these exact words, that she was very afraid.

I was present on that honeymoon, still invisible, inside the womb. Genderless and warm. Perhaps I inherited that sadness though. That displacement. That too early adulthood. Sometimes I ache with homesickness despite the fact I very rarely have had a home.

I think of that first night sleeping with you. Sick with longing for something and not knowing what it was, facing away from you, moving my ass further from the powdery fragile skin of your cock and balls but my head closer to your arm and heart.

This inheritance of women. The moment you recognize you are chattel, and this is who you have bartered yourself off to, and how did it happen.

I Google you out of habit. Obsessively. Monthly. Weekly. Some weeks daily. Some days, hourly.

I approach men reading in coffee shops around the world who have nothing more than your posture, just to check the expression of their faces when they see me, not completely sure I would be able to recognize you after all this time.

And you have changed. I find a picture from your wedding. You are trimmer. You smile broadly. You are in a pink tie on a beach. A beach wedding. You. That you are such a stranger to me after all.

From this night we begin an affair that lasts through the summer, though it felt so much longer. At least once a week you get a hotel room. Sometimes we go to the ballet first. Sometimes we eat. Always we drink. Two or three bottles of wine. I do not know if they were good. I cut my hair short to feel more womanly. I ride you often as you like to watch. I wear the bracelet everyday which you bought me in Europe where you were on holiday with your girlfriend.

I do not know if you tell me you have broken up with her or if I invent this narrative, but I remember the night you turn to me and ask, “. . . have you been the other woman before? You seem so experienced.” Almost like a joke. I have not. I do not even know that is what I am doing then. I will be again though. It is a masochistic and unethical habit I have trouble shaking, to be nothing more than that bit on the side. Which is after all what a person like me deserves.

But, if I was lying to myself, I believe you must have helped. I remember the first night I was allowed to visit you in your apartment. Maybe a month in. Full of old bric a brac from the seventies and literary journals and both dingier and more adult than I'd imagined. That night was the best night. A good night. That night we ate frozen ravioli and I licked the plate clean and we argued about Ralph Ellison smoking on your porch and I told you I loved you and I think, I am not sure, that you said you loved me back. That night I came out of your bathroom holding a Clinique night cream. Whose is this? My mother visited, you said. Maybe that was true. But maybe the lie was not all my fault. Maybe all I did was consent to the narrative you'd created, not invent it entirely. I did not think it was a face cream for woman your mother's age.

Washing. This, too. I think this is the night you tell me about your OCD. Is it the night or is it when we are in the car the next day? You are tapping at, if I remember, a wookie hanging from the mirror. You lament Catholicism. Before you eat chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast. I am always amazed at how frequently you are able to eat. We sit in the car in the parking lot of a baseball field afterwards. This memory so vivid. The car is hot and I am the least groomed you will ever see me. The most myself. I cannot remember if you told me before or is it here about your father, your mother, the divorce and near suicide. I believe this is the first time you tell me fully about mental illness, about isolation. So that years of your life are gone and now I think how strange that we would have so many of the same symptoms, and that I would too be here in my life, and alone. And why is that connection there. And why does it take my breath away to think of it.

Again, the girlfriend returns to the story, as a caretaker, but you imply somewhere else I am sure that now she is gone, and in the same breath, that she can never find out.

You are yet to go on your book tour. I remind myself of this constantly and when I take three steps back I see quite clearly. I was a just dessert after the meal of publishing. I was a reward, a treat after so many difficult years of asceticism and pain. I was never a person to you.

You write a poem about me when we are first seeing each other. You write two poems about me that I am aware of, each startlingly off the mark in their own unique ways. In the first one you call me Samantha, as though you only know my name through MLA format or a class roster and not, as is the truth, through acquaintance. In the poem you say I have always lived in a city, which having shared with you the fact that I spent my childhood in Idaho, is patently untrue and remarkably forgetful. I believe you cite my eyes as the incorrect color. In the second poem you compare me to food at a small

American buffet. You cite my curves, of which I have almost none. I revive you by calling you a genius, which I may very well have done in those days. You undress me, publicly.

The amount to which you romanticized me then. I wonder were I to see you again how disappointed you would be, if I would have to watch the pity in your eyes as you must have watched it in mine that first night. I have considered this when I have considered visiting you in your office, forcing you to engage with me. This is the consideration that always stops me, that certainly I am less beautiful now and that I cannot bear for you to see it. This, and the fear of seeing through the crack in your door a nineteen year old on your lap.

Still. It is only a summer. Retrospectively such a small time and such a small love affair. My obsession is pathological—worse, pathetic. I move to Japan in August. Not even a full summer.

Towards the end, things begin to deteriorate. We spend two hours in the afternoon at a dingy brown motel on the side of a highway. I am very afraid of you this day. I think because we do not drink. I dance around your grabbing hands while singing show-tunes. I believe I sing the full length of Les Miserables, the entire ensemble. Then Muppet Treasure Island. I do not know why this is what I do. I never say no to you. I have only very recently learned, and not very well, that no is something I am allowed to say. This afternoon makes you very angry, but you do not treat me poorly. Perhaps you are angry because this is the afternoon you realize you are sleeping with someone still very young.

That is the last hotel for a while, but you sleep over at my apartment the day before we take a trip to NYC, where I am getting my visa for Tokyo. I am alone as all my other roommates are spending the summer with their families. I have to check you in at the front desk downstairs. Perhaps because I am excited, or more confident in my own space, I drink with abandon. We do not both fit on the bed but on the floor you ask me to touch myself. I do not believe I have ever done this for someone before. I do not touch myself when I am alone yet and feel nothing but shame while you watch from above, stroking. Around now is when something breaks in me. Do I cry first, or vomit.

This is the first time in years I remember I was raped. I had no home but his. I had to go back. Help me. I don't want to go back. This has been so tightly held as a secret to me. I tell you, half naked and shaking and covered in regurgitated red wine. I howl. It is animal. I revile the memory, of how many lovers and strangers have been forced to sedate me in this state. I recoil from myself. But this is the first time. This is when I break open, and do I curse you, or thank you? How much longer might it have stayed dormant in me. What if I had managed to never let it out at all? Kid's stuff. I think you might say this to me when I tell you I am heartbroken over my ex. Why then do you take this seriously. Why do you stay the night and do you feel anything besides trapped. Are you starting to see me? These indignities that gave me the lived experienced to feel confident in your grace. Do you see the pain as kid's stuff? I cannot. I cannot comprehend the logic. I try

and try and, you, I cannot comprehend.

I sleep through the scheduled first train to the city. I wake late and see you on my roommates old bed on the other side of the room. I have vomit on my face and hair but I believe you have taken off some of the dirty clothes. Maybe that was not you. Maybe that was someone else in some other time on a similar morning. Yes, dear reader. There were many of them.

We do not talk about it. You are angry though. I wear a mini-skirt. I wear a blouse with cherry blossoms on it as the visa office is going to take my picture. I pack my bag with disposable cameras and Murakami books and a sweater. You take a photo of me at 30 Rock in front of the statue of Atlas. Posing. I take a photo of you in front of a cathedral but I do not know in which book I hide it. It was the only one of you I had.

At the station you buy us both tickets and this is the most money I have ever seen someone spend on me. One hundred dollars or so. The memory of you signing your name when you pay for them is perhaps the strongest in this whole tale, whatever that says about me. You tell me I hold up with the New York women, but do not say I am pretty.

On the train we are our best. We are both reading and you put your arm around me. I love trains and we talk softly about the landscape, about New York. It is one of the few memories I have of us in public. Acting a couple.

I have not been to NYC since high school when a friend and I stole her father's credit card to cavort in orange mini dresses. The night ending in us being mistaken for women of the night looking for pay. So I am pleased to feel so, rich, with you. It is not until the end of the day of hot dogs and sight-seeing that you mention the previous night. Do you remember? You ask me. Do you remember what you said?

We are at the train station. We are standing at a staircase. There is a large clock. I remember these things clearly, but I do not remember what I say.

We take the train home and I believe I spend the night alone in the empty apartment trying to clean red wine out of the carpet and watching Star Trek Voyager to keep away thought. I believe I watch Voyager or Futurama every hour I am alone for the next two years, to keep from saying out loud, sober, I was raped.

Why did you not hold me if you loved me. Why did you tell me to get help, but then leave. Why do I mention this night at all, or attach you to this other narrative, only because you were present? Am I saying you are complicit in the same system as a rapist? Who at least proposed after the indignity. Whose name I can sometimes tolerate, when I cannot bear the taste of yours? That you were both inadvertently or actively agents of torture, I cannot decide. And that if I say it out loud, of either of you. I am not believed. That you decry me for making myself a victim, for taking away my agency, when I ask you to read this again and I ask you, where. When. What part of you believes this narrator could have made any other choice. And what am I to answer for. And what am I.

The night before I leave for Japan you pick me up from my parents' condo. My parents, my father who is one year younger than you, sit inside while you pick me up. I have a silk slip on under my clothes and we pull into a hotel in town. I think we hold each other more than we have sex. I think this night I believe you will miss me.

You tell me about your high-school sweetheart who sent you a bit of her pubic hair in an envelope. I laugh at you. You might cry. You try to explain to me, this is important. Don't you know love like this is once in a lifetime? Once. And I do not believe you. And it haunts me. That maybe I will never love like this. That I am incapable. That I gave it away to a professor when I was nineteen. Our two bodies in the bed. The window. The small town noises outside. Returning home and finishing packing my bags, opening my passport and looking at the surly photo on the visa. Wondering if I would see you again but never once thinking I would be here, now. Alone.

Then, reader, is this a love story? Then reader. What story is this.



Sam Heaps is a queer writer, educator, and visual artist who is lucky enough to have no more blank pages in her passport. She holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. You can find more of her work in *& Of Other Things Magazine*, *Collected*, and *F Newsmagazine*. She shares her life with her Border Collie.