

WOVEN: The Cartography of Shame and Womanhood

written by Guest Contributor | July 7, 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. You can view submission guidelines for WOVEN [here](#).

Reread the [archives](#), always.

Image Credit: Mariah D. Bosch

The closest I've ever gotten to experiencing the magnificent burden of motherhood was the three minutes I waited for pregnancy test results in a Target bathroom stall. While crouched in the corner of the handicap bathroom, I saw visions of myself holding an infant—*my* infant—on the changing table. I'd tickle it's little tummy before I gingerly changed the diaper, wrap it back up in it's tiny little clothes, and we would continue on. I imagined myself pushing a stroller in exercise clothes on a brisk February morning, maybe grabbing coffee with another mother of a tiny stroller-bound infant, exchanging breastfeeding horror stories or complaining about the lack of sleep but lamenting on how worth it it is to have tiny miracles in our midst.

"You should take a Plan B," he said to me as I uncrumpled my body and began to root around for my clothes on his bedroom floor. "It slipped off halfway through." He gestured toward the condom on the ground and I felt the horror rush over my already sore body. When he offered to pay for half, I politely declined and said I would handle it. I rolled off of the mattress on the floor and put my pants on in the glow of the second Fast and the Furious movie. His room was basic in the way that most men's bedrooms are; it was painted some shade of eggshell and featured an obtrusively large television, messy cords from gaming systems, and one of those Himalayan salt lamps built to detoxify the surrounding air. As I made my way downstairs, I saw my belongings strewn across the living room: my sweater in one corner, my glasses in another, my purse sitting on the kitchen counter. I slipped on my shoes as I dug around for my keys before even leaving the house, making sure I had every belonging to ensure I'd never have to walk into this house again.

I know I didn't scream the second I'd gotten into my car, but when I replay that January morning in my brain, I edit that part in with great detail. In my imagination, the scream wasn't shrill and fearful. It was guttural, the primal kind of scream that signifies loss from a mile away. I scream all the way home.

I scream in the shower as I turn the knob to get the hottest water possible to exfoliate my shame. I scream as I throw on an orange mock turtleneck and go to Walgreens.

I scream as I scan the aisle for the packaging I only recognize from the commercials.

I scream as the employee checking me out tells me it's 53 dollars to ensure I'm not carrying my rapist's child.

I scream as I rip apart the packaging inside my Corolla and read the possible side effects of ensuring I am not carrying my rapist's child.

I only stop screaming to dry swallow the pill.

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As the timer on my iPhone ticked down to zero, I wondered what kind of mother I would be—gentle but firm, open but mindful of boundaries, encouraging but intentional. It was then that I realized the caveats that surround potential motherhood. I thought of my own mother, charismatic and warm as she was absent and preoccupied. She never made promises or freshly baked cookies or homemade Valentines with me at the kitchen table the night before the classroom party.

When my parents divorced a little less than ten years into their marriage, my

mother was thirty two. Within a year or two of my dad moving out of our double-wide trailer, she made the decision to go back to school. I think about how scared she must have been—a young mother with two small children who looked nothing like her, trying to communicate to people through a thick accent and navigating what it meant to be an immigrant divorcee with a husband reckoning with his lifelong queerness.

Much like other single mothers, her days were long. Her day job was as a teacher's aide for a middle school special education class. After her regular school day was done, she'd then work a shift at an after school program before going home, eating scrambled eggs with canned green chile, and heading to her night classes at the local community college. My brother and I had a rotating schedule of babysitters, neighbors, and family friends who would pick us up from school and let us sit in their living rooms until our mom picked us up after her night classes. When I became old enough, she taught me how to make spaghetti and kept the house stocked with things like Banquet brand frozen fried chicken and oven lasagnas as a means to make sure we were fed as she pursued her bachelor's degree. On the weekends she would invite her friends over to drink decaf coffee and paint their fingernails at our kitchen table while they watched *Sabado Gigante* and caught each other up. On Sunday mornings we would watch movies before she made us alphabet soup or spanish rice and folded the laundry in neat square piles on her bed.

She never showed fear. Her neuroses showed itself in different ways—obsession with cleanliness, buying beautiful clothing she didn't really need but wanted anyway, exercising whenever she could. She was beautiful and always smelled nice and the other teachers at school would call her "Macy's" because her outfits were always well-curated. No one could have known how scared or broke or tired she probably was. I didn't know. We were so good at hiding from one another, eclipsing one anxiety for the other all while orbiting around the very idea of survival. I buried my anxiety in books and food and my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. My mother and I both suffered in silence and often directed the aggressive resentment that comes with anxiety at one another, but we knew we just wanted the other to feel okay.

I wonder now how could she not have screamed that primal, guttural scream every day?

Screaming while she learned to pay the bills my father used to,

Screaming after dropping her two children off to school,

Screaming as she tried to figure out what to do with the scarce minutes of free time,

Screaming to process what it meant to have a gay ex-husband,

Screaming because her own mother was more than two thousand miles away.

She only stopped screaming to eat her scrambled eggs and green chile.

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If the test had two solid pink lines, I'd need a contingency plan. I believe in a woman's right to choose, I thought, I still had health insurance and access to a safe abortion if I needed to. It was the only practical answer in a period of my life where I had completely bottomed out – drowning in student debt despite working mass quantities of overtime at Starbucks, living on my parents' couch for months after the most intense breakup of my entire life, sleeping the fourteen hours a day I was not working—there was no way I could carry my rapist's baby to full term and then assume the magnificent burden of motherhood. I wanted to call my own mother.

It was a Saturday afternoon several weeks after the mattress on the floor, after the dry swallowed Plan B pill in my Corolla. My mother was probably curled up on the couch watching a movie edited for TV on TBS or eating scrambled eggs with green chile with corn tortillas. I imagined her small hands as they flipped the tortillas on the gas stove, something I was always too afraid to do as a child. I dialed her phone number from memory and let it ring twice before I hung up. I imagined her pursed lips on the other line, listening to her only daughter explain how scared she was at the possibility of a positive pregnancy test as a product of a man deciding he wanted to terrorize her body.

We hid from each other my whole life and were content with being ships in the night. By the time she finished her undergraduate degree, I was well into the more social years of high school, spending Friday nights at friend's houses and Saturday afternoons neck-deep in extracurriculars. Our identities eclipsed one another – two anxious women bogged down with the pressure to take care of those around us and hide our own secret shames all at once.

While it felt as though my mother and I had little in common—our bodies, our accents, our upbringings—what we did have in common was inherited shame. A resentment I had against my mother in my early adulthood is that she never truly taught me how to be a woman; I had to teach myself how to date, how to put in a tampon, how to find a gynecologist. I resented her for never teaching me how to carry the shame that all women feel day to day, the shame that constantly asks if you're doing enough or too much.

And for half a second, I resented my mother for not preparing me to crouch in a public bathroom stall and be so afraid.

I did not know what to do but blame her for not knowing it could happen to me.

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I wanted to call my mother as badly as I wanted to hide from her.

What was different now? I'm an adult, I thought. I had already hidden from my mother my entire life, just like she had hidden from me. There is something so terrifying and paradoxical about hiding from someone who knows you so fully, all while understanding that there are things about one that the other will ever completely know or comprehend. Is that the nature of being kindred—having at one point shared a body that felt shame and joy and completeness and emptiness all at once? Is that the only time a child is unable to hide from a mother, and vice versa?

Do mothers and daughters hide from each other because at one point, they knew the shame that plagued each other's physical bodies too well? Do they eclipse one another in hopes that one person's shame cancels the other out? Were my mother and I ships in the night because if we decided to ride on the same current or let the same gust of wind catch our sails, we would then have to navigate each other's grief and shame and sadness together?

Once, at a yard sale, my father bought a set of giant leatherbound atlases. My chubby childhood fingers would trace the lines from one end of the book to the other—examining the diagonals and parallels without fully understanding cartography as both an artistic medium and a practical knowledge that people use to survive. I just knew that there were so many lines and that they each meant something different and were able to connect one thing precisely to another despite their physical distance on the page. I would stare at pages of the Pacific Ocean for hours, wondering how the water at Pismo Beach seemed to reach its arms out so far when in the atlas, the end of the page seemed so much closer.

As much as I wanted to hide from my mother, I also wanted to ball myself up in her lap. I wanted us to stretch out the atlases of our grief and horror and sadness and shame and trace the lines. I wanted to see the parallels and the intersections and exactly how far the oceans of our shame reached from one end of the page to the other while also knowing that standing in front of that same shame in real life made it seem so much more expansive, so much more vast and elusive

I wanted her to see my shame and I wanted to see hers, too.

I wanted to scream that primal and guttural scream with my mother, in honor of seeing every ounce of each other's grief and shame for the first time in honor of our refusal to eclipse one another, in honor of our refusal to hide.

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The timer ticked down to zero. I stared at the test, facedown on the cold, metal toilet paper dispenser. If there were two lines, I would call my mother and tell her I was on my way. I would tell her I was bringing my atlases if she was bringing hers, that if she was ready to scream that guttural scream, then so was I. If there were two lines, I would ask my mother to crack

herself open and show me her lines of grief and shame and teach me how to carry mine, too. I would ask her how it feels to carry a physical body and all of their inherited shame. I would ask her how to eventually hide my own shame, even from someone who knows you so fully.

If there was one line, I wouldn't call my mother. I would let her enjoy her Saturday afternoon, let her sit at the kitchen table with a friend and drink decaf coffee, leave her to eat scrambled eggs and green chile. If there was only one line, it wasn't time to stand at the edge of the expanse of our grief and shame. She didn't need to know how much I'd resented her for not showing me how to navigate the shame and the loss of having something so precious be taken from you with only a moment's notice. I had seen her do it my whole life, but we were so busy hiding from each other that I never bothered to take notes.

With clammy hands, I flip the test over. One line. I am not carrying my rapist's child. There would be no strollers or changing tables or tummy tickles, no tearful confession to my mother, no questions between deep sighs about how to love someone who knows the darkest corners of the sea of our hearts enough to show them how dark they really are or how to prepare my child to bear the weight of shame in all of it's heaviness. No primal, guttural scream. The atlases stay closed, for now, and the cartography of our pain goes untraced.



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