

WOVEN: The Threat of a Female Body

written by Guest Contributor | May 22, 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.

Age: 20

Sex: F

Location: Acceptance

I sat in the parking lot of a car dealership and glanced at my long list of gift shop deliveries one more time, determined to avoid my great fear of dropping off the wrong present. Once I was confident in my double checking, I wrapped one hand around the bright strings of three balloons—red, blue, green—tied to a box of cookies and walked inside. I approached the front desk and gave the recipient's name to a preoccupied receptionist.

"He's in the maintenance area," she said, pointing to her right.

I walked down a long hallway hemmed in by a wall of windows that overlooked the car lot, row upon row marking my distance from the lobby. When I finally reached the shop, I approached a group of three men, one of whom grinned and nudged another.

"I think that's for you."

I placed the cookie box and balloons on the counter that separated the three men from me.

"Happy birthday!" I smiled at the nudged one as I began to turn away.

"Aw man," he replied. "I thought you came with it."

I laughed nervously as the men quietly chuckled and looked me up and down. My eyes locked on the countertop, the lone barrier between us.

Did I hear him correctly? Why do I feel scared?

The balloons and box of cookies suddenly seemed so out of place—gifts for a child handed over to a man who wanted to see more than a balloon, taste more than a cookie. I hadn't paid attention to the order form. Did his wife send the gift? His girlfriend? His mom?

I had inhaled the familiar sweetness of the chocolate chip cookies inside the box as I walked the long hallway. But now their aroma gave way to the oppressive odors of grease and fear. The kindergarten-classroom balloons looked silly, out of place next to the leering men who stood in a room full of metal and machines.

I walked away, attempting to shake off my discomfort in the hallway and behind the steering wheel of my Toyota Camry. I recounted the story to myself over and over again, incrementally tweaking the narrative to increase my culpability and reduce his, to heighten the humor and lower the fear. I convinced myself that only two options were possible—either "I thought you came with it" had been a joke based on the obvious fact that no one would *want* me to come with their birthday present, or it was my fault, the natural product of jeans that fit too tightly or accidental flirtation in my voice as I offered happy birthday wishes.

While these versions of the story left me either humiliated or at fault, they still gave me what I wanted most—equilibrium. I could manage shame and guilt as long as the world still operated in the way I'd always known it to operate: male voices letting me know when my female body had crossed a boundary.

By the time I sunk into our hand-me-down denim couch and recounted the story to my husband after dinner, I felt lighthearted. I had shoved the fear I'd felt earlier deep inside me, locked away with the memories of hawkish eyes, of frogs bare and pinned down, of phone calls that led to nicknames and bikinis on a back wall.

"He said WHAT?!"

I felt more annoyed by my husband's reaction than I did by the behavior of the men in the car dealership. Didn't my husband know that most guys acted similarly? Maybe that guy just hit on any and every female who crossed his path. Maybe I just needed to look differently, act differently,

be differently.

What would be the point of getting mad about it?

Age: 19

Sex: F

Location: Powerlessness

I plunged my hands deep into an industrial sink, feeling my way around for a sponge through stacks of identical dinner plates and the scattered spikes of silverware. Another family camp lunch completed, another theme night dinner to go before the day came to an end. I could load the dishes, scrub the sink spotless, and offer my help elsewhere in less than half an hour.

The camp director walked into the kitchen, his eternal smile beaming beneath focused eyes.

“I want you to talk to the Chaos Girl about the dress code. She needs to tone it down.”

I thought of our Chaos Girl—a title aptly chosen for a seventeen-year-old camp version of a Girl Friday who spent her days scrubbing and serving and saving the day—and her punk rock vibe. Daily, I alternated between pride over the ways I fancied myself fitting the camp mold while she didn’t, and envy of the carefree way she seemed to float in and out of the rules’ confines like the bubbles that rose from the sink of soaking dishes.

“. . . Okay. Is there something specific you want her to change?”

“Well, her tank top straps aren’t wide enough sometimes. And she just dresses . . . people notice. I’m asking you to talk to her because, you know, you kind of have a unique style, too.”

I broke eye contact and looked down at my outfit. A thrift store t-shirt, because I hated spending money on clothes. Spending money on clothes made me think about how clothes looked on my body, which made me think about how boys may think about my body, which made me want to throw up or give up, the latter of which I did, by way of the t-shirt racks at Goodwill, the boys’ shorts section at Old Navy, and the Crocs aisle at Academy.

So. By “unique” did he mean “utterly styleless but comfortable for working in a camp kitchen?”

Chiding myself for even internally asking that question, I agreed to talk to

the Chaos Girl.

I couldn't win. The girls who wore t-shirts and brightly colored athletic shorts weren't being corrected for their wardrobes. But the girls who wore tank tops with long shorts found themselves somewhere on the spectrum from "unique" to "inappropriate." I tried to process the once-unspoken-and-now-spoken modesty rules of the camp's subculture—cover up, and cover up in a way we like to look at, in a way that fits our style. Resisting disbelief, I swallowed the message like a pill taken without water.

I returned to the poking prongs of the soaking forks, to the tall stack of plates, the first just like the second, the second just like the third.

When I spoke to the Chaos Girl, she frustratedly demanded to know who made the request.

"It doesn't matter," I replied. "And you have to do it."

Age: 18

Sex: F

Location: Anger

My boyfriend and I took a trip to the mall before traveling from our college town to see his parents for the weekend. I briefly glanced at a back wall covered in swimsuits, then told him we could leave the store.

"You don't want to try anything on?" he asked.

"No. I'm . . . they're all bikinis. I'm just really not comfortable in a bikini."

He proceeded with caution.

"So, what's comfortable for you? What are . . . you looking for?"

"Oh, like a tankini," I said.

"A . . . what?" he asked.

"You know—a tankini!"

His quizzical expression communicated that, no, in fact, he did *not* know.

I placed one hand on my ribs and the other at my hips, like a mime measuring

her abdomen for length.

“A tankini! You know, the top covers, like, most of your torso?”

“Huh,” he replied. “I’ve just only ever seen girls in bikinis.”

Surprise and embarrassment turned my face red, jealousy turned the taste in my mouth bitter. I *cared* that my boyfriend’s eyes had beheld the oceanside midriffs of other girls. That I cared made me feel even more embarrassed than I already did, which reminded me how surprised I felt, which ignited a fuse of frustration over the fact that all of these feelings overcame me for reasons my ever-logical mind couldn’t seem to grasp.

I’d done everything right. I’d tried to follow the rules, and now I loved a boy who didn’t ascribe to all of them. Had those years of rule-following mattered at all?

I fumed, more disoriented than I could admit, and we left the store.

Age: 17

Sex: F

Location: Depression

Under the influence of peer pressure, I ran for president of a home school service and social club. Much to my chagrin, I found myself unopposed in the race. I would be the next student leader of an organization created by parents who retaliated against public school structures through building their own.

Frustration pulsed through me as I accepted the inevitability of the position. Why did people equate my never-ending strings of ideas with a desire to lead my friends? Why would I want to be even more accountable to the adults whose glares had only grown harsher as my peers and I grew older?

My questions remained unanswered, ultimately superseded by my determination to please authority. I wrote and rehearsed ad nauseam a speech to deliver at the first meeting of the semester. When the time came, I made a few jokes, shared a vision for the year, and sighed with relief. I told myself the coming months would turn out fine; they’d look good on my college applications.

The next day, a mother of two teenage boys called my mom. She had chaperoned the prior evening’s meeting, and told my mother that she noticed an inch or

so of my midriff peaking out as I gestured with my hands during my speech. "Showing anything," of course, would not be tolerated at future events.

I'd worn my favorite jacket over a t-shirt, an outfit that helped me feel as good in my own skin as my insecure self could possibly feel. My size triple 0 jeans perpetually threatened to slip past the barely-there hips just below my long torso.

Maybe I'd known my skin may show. Maybe I'd stopped caring. Maybe I'd hoped my words would matter more than if my 95-pound figure revealed "anything."

"Anything"—a word so full of possibility.

You can try anything. You can do anything. You can be anything.

Why did only one "anything" seem to matter?

Age: 16

Sex: F

Location: Bargaining

"You can't ask me that!" I giggled nervously into my Nokia 3390.

"Come on, it's not a big deal," he said, his seventeen-year-old voice equal parts persuasive and taunting.

"I'm not telling you my bra size."

"Fine, how about I guess? Are you a B?"

I glanced at the door, hoping my mom couldn't hear our conversation.

"You're an A, aren't you?"

I closed my eyes and burrowed the back of my head into a pillow, my ponytail spilling over the top. I thought about hanging up the phone.

"Oh my gosh, Abby. Are you a Double A? Come on. You totally are."

"Yeah, I am," I replied, staring down at my curveless frame.

"Oh my gosh, Double A, just like your INITIALS—Abby Anderson! Like Double A batteries! That's what I'm calling you from now on—Double A Batteries."

I played along. I laughed on the phone; I smiled and shrugged when he passed

the nickname around our circle of friends in the days that followed. I shoved my discomfort down, telling myself that a stupid nickname was a small price to pay for attention and belonging.

At least I didn't repel him, I reasoned. At least a conversation that led to a teasing nickname felt slightly more positive than conversations with another boy in which he told me he wanted to marry me, then immediately described sexual experiences with other girls. That other boy, states away, swore he loved me, but said his body just couldn't wait for mine.

I never could bring myself to blame him, really, and maybe my flat chest, my curveless frame, was the reason why. Who in their right mind *would* wait for a body like mine?

A few months later, the giver of the 'Double A Batteries' nickname told me that he didn't consider me cute or pretty, certainly not hot, but I could pass for "decent." I told myself to take his words as a compliment. At least he thought of me, right? "Decent" sounded positive enough. In fact, compared to adult eyes scanning me for signs of impropriety, "decent" almost felt good.

Age: 15

Sex: F

Location: Guilt

A frog's corpse lay in front of me, legs pinned to a tray, beady eyes staring upward. I lifted a scalpel to make the first incision. Some of us girls squealed, others pretended not to mind. There were some able to conduct the experiment genuinely undisturbed. The boys, uniformly, appeared resolute (which, in retrospect, must have been feigned by at least some of them). The atmosphere, though rich with the smell of formaldehyde, felt airy.

"May I speak to you in the hallway, Abby?"

I craned my neck to see our teacher standing over me, his eyes hawkish like the pool chaperone's. Pushing my chair back, I stood and anxiously trailed behind him through the double doors of the church-classroom-turned-homeschool-co-op-science-lab.

"Are you allowed to wear that type of shirt here?" he asked, eyes fixed on my right shoulder.

Taking my cues from the display window mannequins of Charlotte Russe, I had

fallen in love with the wide neckline. The pale pink sweater I'd chosen that day had slipped off of my painfully skinny shoulders, exposing them. I thought of the frog, bare and pinned down, as I tugged at the knit fabric.

"Oh, sorry! I don't think there's anything in the dress code about it," I said, wishing I could superglue the sweater to my collarbone.

"Okay, well, make sure it stays up."

I wanted to reply that I'd keep that top of mind while poking around for amphibious kidneys. Instead, I mumbled, "yes, sir," before walking back to my seat.

I whispered the story to my best friend after class as we scrubbed away the clinical scent that the frogs left lingering on our skin. I tried to scrub away the shame I felt, too, seeking absolution as we stood in the bathroom long after we'd turned off the faucets, hiding from teachers, from classmates, from the obligatory smiles we wore in the hallways.

"Well," she replied when I finished detailing my mortification. "Your shoulders *were* showing."

I looked away, telling myself I must have pushed too far.

The following fall, the written co-op dress code had an update. It now prohibited "off-the-shoulder necklines."

Age: 14

Sex: F

Location: Surrender

"Why do so many stores make girls' shirts with writing across the chest?" a guy friend complained during a game night. "It's already hard enough not to look."

My mind drifted to the many modesty rules I tried to keep, the words from Joshua Harris' book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* that I meditated on so often. "[Lots of girls] would look great in shorter skirts or tighter blouses, and they know it. But they choose to dress modestly. They take the responsibility of guarding their brothers' eyes."

Similarly, my girlfriends and I tried to take responsibility for how boys thought about our bodies. We squatted down instead of bending over to pick up dropped items from the floor, tugging our shirts down in the back and holding

one hand to our chests, ensuring that no gaping in the fabric drew male eyes toward our spines or cotton-bra covered chests. Choosing which hand would abandon its post in order to pick up a pen off the carpet felt like a precarious equation of morality (can't cause the boys to lust!), balance (gangly teenage bodies tend to flounder unpredictably), and pragmatism (I just need the pen!). Yet, we figured out ways to reveal the minimum amount of skin, because that's what good girls who cared about their guy friends did.

Good girls wore our early 2000s messenger bags with the straps running across the tops of our sternums instead of between our breasts, and we gossiped about the girls who didn't. Good girls tightened our bra straps until they dug into our shoulders so that the adjustable elastic didn't slip and reveal itself, and we took pride in our efforts.

If boys saw bra straps, they'd think about bras. If they thought about bras, they'd think about breasts. If they thought about breasts, they'd be tempted to lust, and that would be our fault.

Good girls had all the power. Good girls had no power at all.

Forcing myself back into the moment, I looked at the word-shirt complainer, and then at the other boys around the table. I loved those guys. I felt responsible for them, protective of the minds and hearts they'd bring into their fairy tale marriages someday. So I added "t-shirts with words on the chest" to my mental list titled "Clothing to Avoid."

Age: 13

Sex: F

Location: Shock

My friends and I walked a trampled path between the pine trees of a hill country church camp. Our flip-flopped feet tread dry soil that sent up dusty clouds to linger on our ankles. We laughed loud and light, Texas girls radiating innocence beneath a blazing sun.

We swung open a metal gate and entered the swimming pool area. As we shed the tank tops and shorts that covered up our bathing suits, a chaperone came toward us, his brow furrowed. I assumed his lips carried a "no running, no rough-housing" speech that would be as rote and ignored as the spiel of an airplane stewardess.

He's a dad, I thought. He can't help it.

But his eyes. Why did they bore through us, hawkish?

“You can’t wear that swimsuit here. One-pieces only,” he said, pointing to a tankini-clad eighth grader among us. “Put on a t-shirt, and not a white one.”

My friends and I turned toward each other, then stared at the ground. Our cheeks flushed pink like our painted toenails.

“I guess I need to put on a shirt too,” another girl murmured.

“Your top is long enough,” the chaperone responded. “It doesn’t show anything.”

The hawkish eyes saw us not as hatchlings to protect, but as birds of prey.

I glanced over at the diving board where a boy stood tall and smiling; the sun bearing down on his bare back and torso. He jumped high into the air, weightless in flight. Then, after tucking his legs into a cannonball, he met the water. A splash rose above the sides of the pool like the embarrassment that rose in my chest.

As the boy came up for air, shirtless and carefree, smiling at his cannonball’s impact, I realized that I didn’t want to be there anymore. My swimsuit had passed the test, but now the chaperone saw me as linked to a rule-breaker. I wanted his approval, and I wanted him to never look at me again. I wanted my friends to follow the rules, I wanted to be spared humiliation, I wanted all of us to be allowed to just go swimming, in whatever swimsuits they brought.

We slipped away, brought low, our wings clipped, to retrieve our friend’s cover-up.

Epilogue

Age: 31

Sex: F

Location: Rebuilding

I took this morning’s first sip of coffee as I opened my laptop with my four-year-old, bemoaning the fact that his brother had already gone to school,

cuddled up beside me. That's when I saw it—the tweet from a male pastor saying that the seminary I graduated from last weekend had been “downgraded” by female presence in mixed-gender preaching classes. This body that has birthed babies, that has walked across a stage to receive a master's degree, that types these words in hopes that they might mean something—just twelve hours ago, it was deemed a liability yet again.

I kissed my son's forehead with my eyes squeezed shut as I rode the wave of hurt and fury and disappointment and shame that felt so familiar yet still sucked me under long enough that my lungs burned for breath. I opened my eyes, and my fingers began to type.



Abby Perry is a freelancer with work in *Sojourners*, *Coffee + Crumbs*, and *Christianity Today*. Her recent Prophetic Survivors series at *Fathom Mag* featured profiles of survivors of #ChurchToo sexual abuse. Abby writes about the Evangelical world she's always known and cultural attitudes toward bodies, suffering, and power found within it. She lives in Texas with her husband and two sons. Clips at <http://abbyjperry.com> and tweets @abbyjperry.