

My Body is Land

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My body is an island awaiting colonization, a territory awaiting a flag that will be buried beneath my soft flesh, an untamed land awaiting its conquering. I know it is coming, I can feel the troops circle and swarm. I do not know any more if it is worth fighting, if I should dig spikes just beneath my skin to pierce those who dare enter without permission. I am a woman under fire. My body is not yet a battleground, but the blood-soaked soil still calls out for a fight. I am a woman, and I am alive. I am prey.

When I was twelve years old, puberty hit hard with its “grow out before up” trickery. To adjust for these changes, I went shopping for new jeans with my mother. At the store, however, I noticed that nothing in the juniors’ section seemed to fit my body shape. When I came to my mom in tears, she shrugged and told me that I had birthing hips, that they ran in the family. She said it half with pride, half with indifference. The hips that have been passed down from generation to generation have served as the mantle of womanhood in my family. These hips that were built to procreate. This is a fact of life, that my body had been given a destiny before my mind had a chance to dream one. If our futures function on free will, our destinies are still subject to an Earthly predetermination simply because the space we occupy is labeled female. That does not come without stipulation.

My womanhood has been defined by the shape and state of my body for as long as I can remember, certainly long before puberty. The phrases “knees together” and “sit like a lady” functioned as the soundtrack of my childhood. Thirteen years of Catholic schooling meant thirteen years of plaid skirts and thirteen years of acute awareness of how my body was positioned and perceived. Every girl I went to school with learned to hold their skirts to their bodies when they walked up the staircases - failure to do so meant free pleasure for the hordes of boys standing under the stairs looking upwards. The natural act of walking up a staircase to get to class was changed by my womanhood. The space my body occupied was under scrutiny.

The mental energy it takes to exist as a woman in this world is immeasurable and overwhelming. Each second of my life is conscious and active and aware. When I am walking down the street, I know exactly where every other body is in relation to me. When I am standing in line for my falafel, I know exactly where the eyes of the man behind me are pointed. When I am heading home at night from the parking garage, I am assessing the relative safety of a stairwell with few exit points and 30 seconds in an enclosed elevator with a strange man. When I sit in a parking lot alone, I check the locks one, two, three, four times. Every 15 minutes I repeat this ritual, scanning the pavement for added or moved cars. There is no rest from this awareness, because rest is vulnerability, and that is not something that my womanhood is privy to.

A few months ago I was walking through CVS, and I saw a fake engagement/wedding ring set for less than \$15. I tried it on in my size and strongly considered buying it. I figured that if I wore it when I went out with my friends, I may be able to avoid unwanted and potentially dangerous advances. I knew then, as I have known for years, that when my body belongs to another (and

everyone will assume that “other” is a man), it is suddenly off limits. My voice to say “yes” or “no” or “not yet” or “not again” or “not this way” is only as powerful as the voice of the man who has claimed me. My body is not mine. My womanhood is not mine. My choices and words are not mine.

I am never more aware of this reality than when I am with men. I walk with my male friends down crowded streets at night and feel a freedom radiating from them that I have never experienced personally. How can they be so unaware of their surroundings? How can they not see the way that they affect those surroundings? This disparity is something that I don’t understand and am greatly jealous of. If I could separate myself from my womanhood, what I would most like to do is to get a taste of that freedom, of this blissful peace.

During my first two weeks in college, I took an Uber with my friends to a concert downtown. The driver turned around to talk to us as we got out of the car, and he commented on the crop top I was wearing. It started as a compliment. But then he added “if we were alone we’d be doing something very different by now,” leering at me from his rearview mirror. My blood ran cold, but I wasn’t shocked. “If we were alone, I’d rape you” will always be frightening, and it will never come without the knowledge that, if we were alone, he would probably get away with it. But my mom had not only taught me about my birthing hips; she had taught me to hold my keys between my fingers when I walked down the street. The first graduation gift she gave me was a rape siren. I was scared, but I was prepared for this. This is what separates my womanhood from manhood. This mental energy, the emotional currency I am taxed because I exist in this world, is a burden I cannot separate from my experience as a female. This existence is not free, and the pink tax extends far beyond razors and Bic pens “for her.”

I have been trying to see how I can mentally extricate my womanhood from my body. Writing an essay on womanhood, I thought, would focus less on safety and bodily space than it would on social capital and interpersonal treatment. In the actual writing of it, however, I find myself wholly unable to identify where my womanhood starts and my body ends. This is not something I would have chosen, but I did not seem to have a choice in the matter. My womanhood is inscribed deeply within my birthing hips and the knees that I was told to keep together. Every expectation of constant positional awareness of my body placed upon me by a constant societal “other,” reinforcing the difference between my womanhood and a universal manhood. I am only as woman as my body allows me to be, and the power that I am allowed to wield within society is confined to that same skin barrier. My womanhood is not only based on my body; it seems to start and end there.

My body is an island awaiting colonization. A territory awaiting a flag that will be buried beneath my soft flesh. An untamed plot to be conquered. I did not agree to this, but I was never asked to, never allowed to, never supposed to. The skin I wear is half my father’s skin, the bones my mother grew were never fully hers and were never fully mine, and that is a weight I have continued to bear every day that I walk through this world. I cannot rest, I cannot cease, I cannot retreat. My body is land, and I am not allowed to be queen of it. My body is land, and I am scared of the coming man who names himself king.