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Shotwell

Film photography

My installation of film photographs is my artistic representation of my experience struggling with, and enjoying, girl-to-womanhood. I spent this year alone on countless planes, seated next to older and younger women, I have lived with two dozen female writers and I have contemplated my relationship with my mother. I knew that for this final project I wanted to encapsulate the ideas on femininity that were floating around my mind, and because I had passed so much time thinking of the other women in my life, I figured the best way was to capture their womanhood as well as my own. I interviewed and photographed as many women as I could, strangers, friends and family, and I had the most emotional, amazing process. Through these conversations I heard so many different perspectives, and was shocked by how much overlap these women had with their responses. I believe the process of creating this project brought me closer to the women around me, as we shared experiences and tears and joyfulness. I am immensely grateful and proud of all of them, and appreciate their support more than they can know.

For the women that I knew before photographing, I can proudly say that I captured their beauty, personality, and energy all in one photo. For the strangers I photographed, I decided that being in the setting that I saw them in first was enough.

Overall, I had an amazing time completing this project, and it is by far the most special I have done in my time here.

Beautiful, Raw Womanhood



Juno P. N.

The Oxbow School

OS47

What does it mean to exist as a woman?

I could ask this question a hundred times and still not find any two responses that are the same. To me, this is a beautiful fact. Women exist so differently, yet we all have shared aspects that bring us into a community, regardless of how our womanhood presents itself. This paper is a representation of my path as I discovered and deciphered my own womanhood, for I started with little knowledge and not a single answer to my questions. I conducted interviews with over a dozen women, both strangers and those close to me. I asked all of them the same three questions surrounding womanhood and femininity. I also scoured the internet for blog posts and articles written by women so that I had a myriad of different perspectives as I worked through the terrain that is my femininity.

Perhaps the biggest contributor to this adventure is my mother. While I wrote this paper, I was forced to reflect on my relationship with her. I ended up reaching conclusions I hadn't been aware of when I began this tedious process, and it made me all the more thankful for her presence in my life.

As draining as it can be for me to think for extended periods about how I am a woman and what that means, this process was enlightening and oftentimes sorrowful, and I am appreciative of all the emotions it aroused.

What, if anything, connects women— even those who don't know each other?

*Woman #1: "I would say that... I guess the shared understanding that
you have always been second-rate.*

*I don't know, it's just the bond of knowing that
you have to fight for your rights and,
I don't know, that probably all women have faced something misogynistic
or sexist at the hands of some dude."*

I have never truly understood womanhood, although my perception of it has shifted throughout my life. When I was eight years old, I was positive that turning sixteen meant growing a tail and swimming away as a mermaid. At thirteen, I believed that acting older than I was would mean maturity, and consequently I would be a woman. While I am still in the dark about most things, I do know that I am curious, and I want to explore the idea of femininity: both my own and others. As I started thinking about gathering other perspectives, I did a one-second google search with the words, "what does it feel like to be a woman". The first article that popped up was a blog post from an anonymous woman named Amy. She goes into detail about her experience of entering womanhood at the early age of eleven, being told by adults that, "Girls these days want to be women way too early." It only reinforced the question I'd been asking for a while: What makes a girl a woman? Is there a "too early", or is it a line many of us cross without even knowing?

What does it mean to you to exist as a woman?

Woman #2: "It means whatever the fuck I want it to mean."

I. Where am I supposed to put my anger?

Up until the age of fifteen, I was a confused and angry child. I believe the peace I found recently had mostly to do with the realization that my mother was, in fact, not my enemy. She is not supposed to be my friend, and it was a struggle trying to grasp that while watching Rory and Lorelai's seemingly perfect relationship in *Gilmore Girls*. But what Lorelai lacked as a mother is precisely what my mother never lacked— authority with love. She loves me to the moon and back and back again, but she will never hesitate to reinforce the structure I sometimes desperately need. Because of her parenting, I have grown into a decent person. As soon as I understood that her consequences weren't there to further irritate me, all the anger I had pent up towards her dissipated. This is not to say my anger fully vanished. I love my anger and I would never allow it to walk away. But during this time, the tiniest issues would tick me off to the point of physical violence toward inanimate objects. Once I learned how to cut with words, I used verbal violence towards the humans closest to me, since I knew that leaving a bruise would damage relationships more irreparably than heat of the moment insults. When my rage crossed a line and I had to cause more hurt than my words could spit, I would direct my anger towards my paper blinds, mirrors, even a wooden rocking horse. For a little girl who grew up hearing how she must remain composed and collected, losing my cool felt like the end of the world. A few months ago I was angry. Justifiably so. In the past, I would have tore up my room and pretended it alleviated my anger so that I wouldn't confront the cause of my hurt by spewing rage. This time, I made it clear to the person who lit the fuse how I felt. The response I received was that of a scared, hurt child. While I continued attempting to explain that my being angry was not equivalent to hating her, she continued victimizing herself to the point where I could do nothing but apologize, and with that, my fury planted a few roots in my liver. Her firm belief that anger was nothing but a terrible thing that brought no good couldn't bond with my belief of the truth: that when handled correctly, anger is a beautiful emotion. It's an intense type of sadness that arrives when I have so much pain that I simply don't know what to do with it. That makes me afraid, but it keeps me in touch with my emotions. As long as one is feeling anger, one can know that they are human. Throughout

the short duration of that relationship, I ruminated on my anger more and more, to the point where I would be forced to meet her with silence. I thought it would be more harmful to us if I had spoken up, without realizing that I was allowing rage to eat away at me.

One morning I asked her why she was so repelled by anger. Her response was, “Nothing good ever comes out of it.” It made me wonder if the way girls are raised to brush off their anger doesn’t only affect how we interact with men, but other women too. Looking back at it, I have had countless friendships with girls that ended after one argument, or at least could not be repaired to the way we were. The way girls have passivity shoved down our throats has, in turn, made many of us genuinely fearful of what could happen if we lose our temper - even more so when considering the fact that so many girls and women have bottled up rage for years and years.

So my question to her, if I had the opportunity, would be, “If you don’t want me to tell you when I get angry, where would you suggest I put it that is just as healthy?”

As we grow up into a world where we are told to be *sugar, spice, and everything nice*, how does a woman unleash her rage without stamping “emotional, out of control, and immature” onto their chests in scarlet?¹

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850

*“There is little more threatening to the social order than
a woman who’s angry.”²*

II. “She’s Such a Pretty Crier”

“Women are born with pain built in. It’s our physical destiny: period pains, sore boobs, childbirth, you know. We carry it within ourselves throughout our lives, men don’t.

They have to seek it out, they invent all these gods and demons and things just so they can feel guilty about things, which is something we do very well on our own. And then they create wars so they can feel things and touch each other and when there aren’t any wars they play rugby.

We have it all going on in here inside, we have pain on a cycle for years and years and years and then just when you feel you are making peace with it all, what happens? The menopause comes, the fucking menopause comes, and it is the most wonderful fucking thing in the world.

And yes, your entire pelvic floor crumbles and you get fucking hot and no one cares, but then you’re free, no longer a machine with parts. You’re just a person.”³

When season two of *Fleabag* aired, everyone went crazy for Kristen Thomas Scott’s monologue in episode three– I see why. As I was growing up, the media that surrounded girl-to-womanhood endorsed a “sad-but-glamorous” lifestyle, where our pain is aestheticized, but hidden under the guise of spreading awareness. The excessive use of social media only promoted this beautiful depression, first with 2014’s Tumblr era, and now with the explosion of TikTok and the trends it promotes. Currently, we are witnessing a resurgence of the Tumblr era, with young girls embracing an aesthetic they label as “coquette”, achieved by loving older men, Lana Del Rey’s unreleased music, and dressing like a

² Zimmerman, Jess. "A Fury's Battle: How Our Culture Demonizes Women's Anger and Protects Abusers." *LitHub*, 11 Mar. 2021, lithub.com/a-furys-battle-how-our-culture-demonizes-womens-anger-and-protects-abusers/. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

³ "Vulture." Performance by Kristin Scott Thomas and Phoebe Waller-Bridge. *Fleabag*, written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, directed by Harry Bradbeer, season 2, episode 3, Two Brothers Pictures, 18 March 2019.

nymphette⁴. There are competitions on who has the most trauma, and pro-anorexia accounts have revived with body-checking⁵ and “what I (don’t) eat in a day” videos. On the exterior, the 2014 Tumblr aesthetic meant Doc Martens and listening to The 1975. However, the deeper you dive, the more you’ll discover the dark side of this nostalgic time; the encouragement of eating disorders, self-harm, and the romanticization of the movie *Lolita*⁶, which led to young girls thinking pedophilia and being attracted to older men isn’t wrong, but rather edgy and aesthetic. It should be noted that in no way are said victims at fault for the way their undeveloped brains processed the treacherous culture of the time. It is tricky to not succumb to the pressure of social media, the reason many, like myself, have downloaded TikTok or Tumblr even if it only makes me feel worse. When scrolling through a Tumblr feed, being fed nothing but images of skinny collarbones and thigh gaps with sickly bruises, Lux Lisbon⁷ smoking cigarettes with a blank stare, quotes from artists such as Lana Del Rey, Melanie Martinez, and MARINA, there will inevitably be a dark influence on how you must act and present yourself as a young woman to fit society’s standards. The truth is, a woman can never be considered “perfect”. People will always find reasons to tear down young women.

What does it mean to you to exist as a woman?

*Woman #3: “To know that you can do whatever you want because
whatever type of woman you are
it will be criticized.
Might as well be the kind of woman you want to be.”*

⁴ “A sexually precocious girl barely in her teens.” Merriam-Webster definition.

⁵ Presenting your body from different perspectives to show others your “progress” with an eating disorder, and therefore influence an audience into believing they must reach your weight.

⁶ Adrian Lyne’s movie adaptation of *Lolita*, 1997

⁷ Sofia Coppola’s movie adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides*, 1999

“Most of the time, most days, I feel nothing. I don’t feel anything. It is so boring. I wake up and I think, again, really? I have to do this again?”⁸ Villanelle’s monologue in season two of *Killing Eve* is a brilliant example of discussing women’s mental health without glamorising it. In comparison, the 2003 movie *Thirteen* trained a generation of young women into believing that female sadness is pretty. There is a famous scene where the main characters Evie and Tracy are sitting in Tracy’s room after doing whippets. Tracy screams, “Hit me. I’m serious, I can’t feel anything! Hit me.” Though the movie might have been an attempt at revealing the dangers of acting older than your age, instead it appealed to an audience of girls who are the same age as the characters in the movie: thirteen. Too young to be doing cocaine and having sex with twenty-somethings, and too young to be watching girls their age doing that. Instead of seeing *Thirteen* as a warning, many began molding their personalities to match it. Even though I feel it is impossible to fully escape the societal stress on how young girls should act and look, as it is forever around, if I had grown up with media such as the aforementioned monologues in *Fleabag* and *Killing Eve*, perhaps I, and many others, would have reached the conclusion that our womanhood doesn’t have to equate to the “deathly beautiful” archetype of a woman.

Do you agree with the idea that women overlook their own pain?

If yes, how and why?

Woman #4: “I feel like society has pressured women to not show the pain so it’s sort of a natural response to just sort of get over it.

Pain is weakness so you try to combat that.

We’re seen as emotional people, so, to combat that, a lot of women try to not show pain.”

⁸ Comer, Jodie, performer. "I Hope You Like Missionary!" *Killing Eve*, directed by Francesca Gregorini, written by Luke Jennings and Jeremy Dyson, season 2, episode 6, 12 May 2019.

III. The Measure of a *Strong Woman*

Something that will never disappear when it comes to how society views women's pain, is the concept of a "strong woman". From the day we are born we begin experiencing pain. Until the day we die, we are measured based on the magnitude of our strength. Victims who do not allow their trauma to overcome them are not victims— they are survivors. They are strong. They are brave. Why is it that our strength is defined by how much pain we can tolerate? Why would showing that we are in pain signify weakness and not strength? Women have become so adjusted to living with pain that we have begun overlooking it ourselves: medically and emotionally. Too often it happens that doctors write off a woman in pain as hysteric, simply because women are stereotyped as untrustworthy and irrational. In 1948, a study was conducted by James D. Hardy and Carl T. Javert to find out if childbirth was actually painful, or if it was simply women being dramatic. In order to figure this mystery out, they had a number of female patients tested on a pain scale that had been previously tested on men. Those that couldn't take more pain than a level three or four were written about with some shaming, though the conclusion of the experiment was that childbirth was painful. It strikes me as insane that men initially felt the need to conduct an experiment to decide whether or not women were lying about their pain, and that they measured female pain tolerance for childbirth according to levels of pain that men could handle. Elizabeth Barnes put it perfectly when she said, "Women's pain, it seems, is hysterical until proven otherwise."

Do you agree with the idea that women overlook their own pain?

If yes, how and why?

Woman #5: "We can't demolish at once the whole of the world we inhabit, so we deny the depths of our pain and humiliations and suffering in order to survive and thrive as best we can; also there is

great joy and pride and happiness too.”

How do you exist as a woman?

“I am strong enough powerful enough to bear the entirety of this dynamic.”

IV. Like Mother Like Daughter

During my teenage years I sustained a rebellion aimed specifically against my mother. Now at sixteen years old, I love her in a way words could not describe. When I am confused, homesick or lonely, I miss her presence and this overwhelming urge to talk to her takes over. Sometimes I simply need to hear her advice, her more complex understanding of the world, sometimes I simply need to laugh with her. Before I left for four months, we began an unspoken routine of conversations in the kitchen at midnight. Like clockwork, I would come downstairs to get water, and she would take my appearance as a sign to make tea and stop working.

Reflecting on my adolescence, I believe I was so entwined for too long in my own world of femininity that I never once thought of her place in the world of womanhood. A couple months ago I was in a writing workshop where we dissected a poem called *The Raincoat* by Ada Limon. I think of it daily, almost as a morning affirmation. I sent it to my mother with no context, and no further acknowledgement. One evening I was reading through my mother’s texts after searching for my name, as one does, and instead of finding complaints, I saw that she had sent the poem to my godmother, with the caption: *Juno just sent me this*. My godmother is one of the strongest women I know. She replied: *She realized. It took 16 years*. The poem, referencing Limon’s own mother, goes...

When the doctor suggested surgery
and a brace for all my youngest years,

my parents scrambled to take me
to massage therapy, deep tissue work,
osteopathy, and soon my crooked spine
unspooled a bit, I could breathe again,
and move more in a body unclouded
by pain. My mom would tell me to sing
songs to her the whole forty-five minute
drive to Middle Two Rock Road and forty-
five minutes back from physical therapy.
She'd say, even my voice sounded unfettered
by my spine afterward. So I sang and sang,
because I thought she liked it. I never
asked her what she gave up to drive me,
or how her day was before this chore. Today,
at her age, I was driving myself home from yet
another spine appointment, singing along
to some maudlin but solid song on the radio,
and I saw a mom take her raincoat off
and give it to her young daughter when
a storm took over the afternoon. My god,
I thought, my whole life I've been under her
raincoat thinking it was somehow a marvel
that I never got wet.

There is no one else in this world that will ever understand the way I am half-girl, part-woman,
other than her. I hope to have developed a better sense of awareness. I understand why holding her while

she cried in front of me for the first time was so devastating, and I understand that breaking like a little girl does not mean you are any less of a woman.

A few months ago I texted her, after two days of needing nothing but a kitchen conversation with my mom. I asked her, “Where is the line between girl and woman?” She waited twenty-nine minutes before answering.

“When you start asking that question you are nearing the line.”

Thank you to all the women who participated in this project– through shared emotions and tears, it has been completed due to you.

Most of all, thank you Mom.

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