

# Woven

Every story I have ever told has a kind of breach to it, I think. You could say that my writing isn't quite right. That all the beginnings have endings in them.

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I can't remember the name of the bar, but I remember I was twenty-two, and I was having the time of my life on Halloween night with my then-girlfriend in Greenwich Village. At twenty-two we could drink like beautiful androgynous unafraid fish. Young badass women in love in the bohemian capital of the world. That's how it felt to me, anyway. She was a student at New York University. I wasn't anything, having flunked out of college. We had plans that spanned continents. Youth foreshortens everything—faces, lives.

Partway through a shit-ton of cheap vodka shots she got up on our rickety little wooden bar table and danced. When I say “danced” I mean punched the air like a boxer. So I climbed up on my chair and “danced” just underneath her, and she started laughing uncontrollably, pointing, pointing at my midsection, because my skirt was tucked up into my neon-blue tights enough that my neon-blue butt was showing. I guess I’d made a miscalculation the last time I’d used the bathroom. We laughed that kind of deep-throated about-to-be-women laugh. The laugh of girls before their voices thin out and tighten from the exhaustion of womanhood.

In fact—and it’s only because I’m old and no longer give a crap that I can tell you this—I laughed so hard I made a little unstoppable poop in those neon-blue tights. Like a perfectly round deer turd.

It was a night I wanted never to end.

Or, I wish with all my heart that the story ended there.

Mythic youth.

But that’s not where the story ended.

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When I was four years old my Lithuanian grandmother told me a folktale about the water spirit Laume. I’d accidentally locked myself in my grandparents’ bathroom and gone into hysterics when I couldn’t get out. My father was furious at my ineptitude. His yelling nearly broke the door down. This is the story she told me once I was liberated.

Laume came from transcendental waters, and her spirit lives in all waters, even in baths and showers, in rivers, streams, oceans, the rain, and in toilets. She is the guardian of all children, the not yet born, the newly born, the orphaned, the forgotten, even the dead children. If there is a child coming into the world, she can foresee it. If a child is mistreated, she will sometimes take him and raise him herself. If a child is lost, she protects him, while gathering information about the

usefulness of the parents. If parents are mishandling a child, she will transform him into whatever lesson they need to learn.

Above all she values sincerity, and next industriousness on the part of mothers, particularly the women's work of weaving.

Laume rewards those who work hard; she also punishes severely those who seek reward without an attention to hard work, and those in pursuit of self-aggrandizement.

Go look underneath your pillow to see if she has left you treasure.

I walked upstairs to the bedroom.

My whole body shook. I stood in the bedroom a long minute with my eyes closed, waiting for hands on my shoulders. I looked around for my father there in the dark, because that's the life I had, a father there in the dark, but he wasn't anywhere.

I looked underneath my pillow.

There was a star woven from straw.

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Laume takes many forms and inhabits many tales. One of the most famous Laumes was a fisherman's daughter, Egle, queen of the serpents. One day Egle finds a large eel in her clothes after swimming in the Baltic Sea. The eel takes her clothing and only returns it when she promises to marry him. When she accepts, the eel becomes a handsome young man named Zilvinas. They live underwater together and have three children, two sons and a daughter. After a time, Egle longs to visit her parents and siblings on land.

Zilvinas is terrified that Egle's former family will reject her. But though he is worried, he agrees to let her go and bring their children. Zilvinas instructs Egle to call to him: "If you are alive and well, come back to me in a milky wave; if you are dead, in a bloody wave."

When she arrives to visit her earthly family, Egle's brothers, jealous of her freedom, torture her sons to death; her daughter, smitten with one of the earth brothers, betrays the secret call and lures Zilvinas to shore, where he is murdered. When Egle returns to the lip of the water, she sees a bloody wave and learns that her earth brothers have betrayed her. She curses herself and her daughter, turning them into trees forever.

Many infant girls in Lithuania have the names of trees.

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In the ninth year of our eleven-year marriage, my second husband emerged from our kitchen pointing a gun at me. I haven't written much about this, at least not literally. I don't ever talk about it. It's a bit like a little malformed myth still lodged between my heart and my rib cage.

In America, it's tricky to describe violence without it turning into entertainment.

A Sig Sauer P229 9mm handgun. Statistically, the most popular handgun in the United States.

I'd just entered the house after work. The kitchen light was on, but not the living room light, so he was backlit. The whole house smelled like Jameson. I stood in the dark. My car keys were still in my hand. He crossed the space between us. When he was maybe three feet away, he stopped. The gun was pointed at my chest. The air in my lungs concrete. I walked the rest of the distance between us, until the gun was between my breasts. That's how I know he was crying.

I stared at my second husband.

Nothing moved in the house except our breathing.

"Stop loving me," he finally said, the gun heavy enough for me to feel my sternum ache.

As if love was killing him.

Stop loving me.

“No,” I said, and I closed my eyes and put my arms around him and pressed in. I waited for the possible death moment between a man and a woman.

Walking straight into violence was nothing new to me. I’d learned how to walk deliberately and unflinchingly into violence from my father, like so many other children do in this country.

In fact, in this country we raise all of our children on one form of violence or another. And so my question is not, “Why did you walk into that violence?”

My question is, “Where does my love come from that I walk through male violence to find it?”

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Laumes are the oldest spirits of Lithuanian mythology. The images of these spirits may have developed during the historical Mesolithic period, just after the Ice Age. Laume first appeared in the form of animals, like goats, bears, or mares. Later she took on a half-human appearance, usually bird claws for feet, the lower body of a she-goat, and large stone nipples. Later still she was represented as a beautiful and supernatural water woman-creature, with fair hair and skin the color of the moon. Laumes were both benevolent and dangerous. They could tickle men to death and then eat their bodies. They could protect women and children or punish them brutally.

Laumes lived near lakes, abandoned bathhouses, rivers, swamps, or other waterways. Laumes liked to gather near water under the New Moon at night and dance. They could cause rain and storms and hail by singing and dancing and swimming.

Anyone who knows me knows why I am attracted to Laumes. I am a child of the waters. But then so are all of us, before the breach.

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I had a recurring dream for twenty years that I would have three sons.

I did not have three sons, and I'm fifty-two, so it's not looking likely. What I did have was a daughter, who died, and one son, sun of my life. But I did have three husbands.

Maybe dreams don't mean a goddamned thing.

Or maybe they mean everything.

They say you marry a man who is like your father. My father, the artist-turned-architect, molested and abused us. He was big. Angry. Loud-fisted. Marked us forever—three little women, making for their lives.

My first husband was gentle as a swan. A painter with long fingers and eyelashes. You can see what I was shooting for. I almost self-immolated next to his passivity.

My second husband, another painter, used harsh lashing strokes on the canvas. He was big and loud, but made softer by alcohol and art. Except when he wasn't. The gun of him. Sig Sauer.

My third husband, father of my son, is big and loud and a filmmaker. But there is the gentleness of a cellist in his hands and eyes.

So sometimes I wonder if my dream was meant to show me not three sons, but three husbands. Take my second husband, for instance—the one who pressed the gun of him to me—he was a lot like a child. I wonder if Laume came and took my baby daughter, who died right before I met him, and replaced her with a man-child. This is kind of how we get through our lives: we tell ourselves stories so that what's happening becomes something we can live with. Necessary fictions.

Maybe I had some hard lessons to learn about the difference between doing good work and trying too hard to be a woman.

Woman. Like anyone even knows what that is still.

Or violence. Maybe this is a story about violence.

Or maybe I'm still looking for a way to forgive myself for that failure of womanhood. Two marriages gone busto. Jesus, woman. I keep waiting to feel like a failure.

I wonder what would happen if I didn't know what this story was about.

I think this might be a children's story.

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It is said that Laume was a silken-haired sky goddess who lived in the clouds. One myth claims that she fell in love with a beautiful young man down on earth, and that they had a son. Laume descended to earth from the sky to feed her son with her breasts. But when the highest god found out about the son and the sacrilegious love, he killed the boy and scattered his remains between the stars in the sky, and he cut Laume's breasts. Stone pieces of them can still be found on earth in the form of sea-creature fossils.

You would not believe how many sea-creature fossils I've collected over the years. Tons of them. I don't know why. Crustaceans and sea spiders. Conglomerate rocks with pieces of hermit crab fossilized in them. Fish from the desert hills. Ammonites. It's a wonder to see something so clearly meant for movement in water captured swirling in stone. Like a petrified snapshot. Or like history's motion arrested.

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I'm going to try it again.

When I was twenty-two I spent Halloween night in Greenwich Village. I drank vodka in a Russian bar with my girlfriend at the time. A huge middle-aged Russian man and his male friends said drunk fat Russian things to us all night, not a word of which we understood, and we laughed, they laughed, and we toasted, and things seemed strangely OK, like when you are young. I kept yelling, "I'm Lithuanian!" to the Russian men, like that was something. Later in life I'd learn what an idiotic thing

that was to be yelling. But at the time it seemed everyone, even the moon, was laughing and drunk.

At midnight a giant parade of costumed people passed the bar, and so we joined them, and walked for miles together. There were animals: goats, bears, horses, unicorns, centaurs. There were bird claws for feet, the lower bodies of she-goats, large, extended tin foil breasts and exaggerated codpieces, and all sorts of witches, fairies, and mermaids. It was one of the happiest nights of my life. We were two girl-women in love, we were walking with an army of people in Halloween costumes more vivid and outrageous than reality would ever be. Fear was not anything about us.

Later on, we found ourselves a few alleys away from her crappy dorm room. We were stumble-walking, arm in arm. We kissed and teetered along and laughed. I put my hand up her shirt. Then I saw her head lurch forward in a not-right way, and she made a sound—or something did—like someone smashing a pumpkin with a bat. Something hard at my back, and then my side imploding.

Two men had come up behind us. One hit her in the skull with a baseball bat, another stabbed me in the lower back and side with a knife. My girlfriend dropped to her knees, her head hitting the pavement. I saw her body perfectly balanced, head and knees keeping her perched upright, blood everywhere. I saw the two men laughing and yelling. I saw their shaved heads. I saw stars before I passed out. The last thought I remember thinking was: *Skinheads*.

There is language enough to describe it, but going there is beyond language, so mostly I don't. I don't know how to belong to the story in a way that doesn't betray it. I don't even want to be in the story, the one in which a woman I loved was left partially paralyzed.

But mostly I don't tell the story because I didn't stay with her happily ever after forever and ever.



I've noticed the scar at my back and side has softened over the years. It's so tiny you can barely see it. Receding with age and fat, I suppose. Or the guilt of wanting more life.

\*

A woman was harvesting a flowerbed and had taken her child with her. She was so busy with her work that the child slept through the day.

The woman went home in the evening to milk the cows and make dinner. She served her husband, who asked her, "Where's my son?" With terror she whispered, "I have forgotten him!" She ran as fast as she could to the place where she had left her son, and she heard Laume speak: "Hush, forgotten child." The mother asked Laume for her child back. The fairy said, "Come, come, dear woman, take your child, we have done nothing to him. We know that you work very hard, at many jobs, and that you didn't want to leave your child behind."

The Laumes went on to shower the babe with treasures, enough gifts to raise several children on. The mother went home with her precious baby and with her gifts; she was greeted with great joy.

Another woman, hearing of this good fortune, was taken over by jealousy. She thought, "I shall do the same as her, and also be showered in gifts." The next evening, at dusk, she took her child, left him in the fields, and went home. When, after dinner, she returned to the field, she heard the Laumes: "Hush, you left your child in greed." And the child screamed with great pain, for he was being pinched mercilessly. The Laumes continued their torture until the mother approached. Then they tossed the child at her feet. The babe was dead.

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When my infant daughter died, spilling out with our shared waters, the story breached. Every story I have ever told has a kind of breach to it, I think. You could say that my writing isn't quite right. That all the beginnings have endings in them.

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Violence doesn't only exist in men.

Think of mother violence, for example. When my son was in grade school I had hysterically violent thoughts. I was afraid he'd be bullied. I actually pictured the moment—I saw myself stride across the school grounds, pick a bully child up by his ankles, hold him upside down, shake the shit out of him, and fling him in a dumpster. I thought all the way through “Mamma has to go to jail.”

My Lithuanian grandmother cut the tip off my father's tongue as a boy.

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After I became a mother and married for the third time, I had a skinhead in my writing class. I know he was a skinhead not from the way he looked, though that's exactly what he looked like: the '90s version of a London skinhead. I know he was a skinhead because he came to my office and told me. He asked not to have to do group work. I'm embarrassed to say that made me laugh. I also remember thinking: *You are a brutal abomination and Not long ago this guy was just a boy, just his mother's son—what happened?*

His writing was impeccable. He completed every assignment. His theses were not Hitleresque. He was oddly polite and courteous. I gave him a C, only because I could, whether or not I should have. If he'd challenged the grade, he'd have won. In many ways he was the best writer in the class.

What is a teacher? A mother?

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Another Laume is a goddess of the home and a warm hearth. If you do not tend to your family and fire well, she burns your house down. With everyone inside. The word for “fireplace” in Lithuanian has come to be understood as “family relations.”

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In my twenty-third year of teaching college, on a day we were discussing violence as a theme, something repressed inside me lurched, and I told my Halloween-night story to the class. I mean it shot out of my mouth before I could stop it.

Sig Sauer-like.

I lifted up my shirt and showed them my scar. It was one of the more unprofessional teaching moments of my career, though it would certainly not be the last. So much shame came out of my mouth. The shame of a daughter whose body was written by her father. The shame of leaving a woman I loved. The shame of failed marriages and motherhoods.

At the end of the story I also told them what I'd learned about our attackers. They weren't skinheads. They'd been Marines. My then-girlfriend would be neurologically damaged and partially paralyzed for the rest of her life. The marines spent three months—ninety whole days—in jail. One was dishonorably discharged.

Everyone got quiet. I thought maybe the story was over, and my intention was to get us all writing and out of the well of overly personal pathos I'd let us fall into, but then a Latino man in the class, his neck covered in tattoos, stood up. All I knew from his writing was that he'd been a gang member. That he'd made mistakes and gone to jail. That he was writing A+ ideas with C+ skills. That his parents were undocumented workers. That he had four sisters. But I learned that day that he'd also been on three tours of duty for our country before he'd turned twenty-two. I also learned that the military had begun relaxing tattoo restrictions in 2004. He stood up and said, "I apologize on behalf of Marines." His sentence was perfect. The air in the room vacuumed.

He walked the length of the room, straight at me. I braced myself for the moment—I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep from crying. Briefly it occurred to me that I might die if he got any closer, closer than three feet away. Then he did a regular human thing. He hugged me. He

said it again. This time in my ear, and his breath made the hairs on my neck shoot up. “I apologize on behalf of Marines.”

But that’s not what I heard. I heard, “You don’t have to punish yourself for love.”

I didn’t die like I thought I might. From his random compassion, I mean. I wasn’t a very good teacher. I don’t know what I was. I gave him an A in the class, in the end. That day we wrote stories about the small violences in our daily lives.

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In one story, Laume takes all the children away from their parents in a particular village, because they sent their eldest boys to war. The mothers become barren and the fathers can no longer hold any food down, and thus they die. The village fades from history because the parents did not take care of their children.

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You know, stories change, just like the lives we’ve lived and selves we’ve inhabited. Nobody’s been the same person twice. I mean really. It’s the people walking around acting and sounding especially self-assured and whole who worry me the most.

I like hearing the world’s stories about itself. That’s partly why I teach world literature. It helps me feel less incarcerated by the world, or my past, or my mistakes and confusions. It helps me remember I’m not just American. I’m not just a woman. A mother. A teacher. A wife. I find value in thinking in stories. Aren’t we all woven through with stories? Isn’t that how we think of our lives, how we survive them? Now, when someone hurts me, I remember that they are only living the terms of their own fictions—sometimes desperately—so their selves don’t unravel.

I like that idea. A woven person.

Little misshapen stars made of straw.