

# Further down the line

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The violence I survive is second hand, my own against myself.

It never belonged to me, I breathed it in like diesel particulate, centuries of hatred of women bedded in as I walked down the street, sipped it with milk, ate it with chocolate, learned it by heart, enacted it upon my body.

I've hated my womanness, wanted it gone, each period a concentration of loathing, a pact to corral internalised toxicity.

What to give up to be loved.

What to give up to stay safe.

What to give up to live.

I'm the beloved daughter of a woman who did not much like women. Women, she said, were sly, not to be trusted, did not say what they meant.

Oppression carves its own channels to power and expression, it moves where it can. No blame.

I'm the daughter of a church with a castrated goddess as its figurehead.

Selectively bred over centuries for acceptable traits. Docility, domestication. A cull of aggression and ambition. A brake of self doubt.

I envy an ease of entitlement—to speak, to cause offence, to be angry and unguarded, uncluttered by second guesses.

I tried to circumvent my mother's worldview, itself the fruit of a life spent accommodating. In doing so, I devalued and disowned her. Her pain was unbearable to me. I liked the vitality and hope of my father. I wanted nothing to do with smallness. Who in their right mind, I thought, would want to be a grown-up woman, when being one was clearly so devalued, assaulted, assessed, held in contempt, patronised, kept out.

Four and a half decades into the project of womanness, I thought I loved a therapist—who claimed to love women, as long as they were quiet. Each of those contradictions could take a lifetime to unpick. Few of them were spoken. But what interests me most right now is how our internalised views of Men and Women, his and mine, clicked into place, set something whirring that tightened as it spun.

It was novel. It was such a relief to step out, for a moment, of a lifetime's resistance. Please, God, let me be only kind and good, and pretty as well, let me listen without interrupting, support without needs, be interested and attentive, let me be soft and unguarded, funny and clever and sparky (but not too much), let me, please, leave this troublesome self at the door. He did not notice the excision, I think, because he thought deep down that's just how women are, what they needed to be, what their "natures" are, and that it was only right he should be loved.

It was a terrible, relatively brief, trying on of a role. Real and unreal. Ask, and the archetypes will come. A deadly serious playing at being a Girl.

It was a disappearance over an event horizon (oh, the peace of non-existence) before my cells kicked in, a visceral scream of an organism trying to live, and before enough people I loved called for me to come back.

It is an intimate violence I am familiar with, the turning of a self against a self.

It is shocking to see and feel it in its murderous rawness.

Of late, I refuse to attack my creatureliness on behalf of another, on behalf of a thoughtform, centuries old. I refuse, passing a mirror, to hate my flesh. I refuse to hate the hairs on my legs or the whiskers on my chin (even there, I whisper "too much? too much?")

And where I plant my aggression, my joy grows. Where I cherish my refusals, love comes.

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