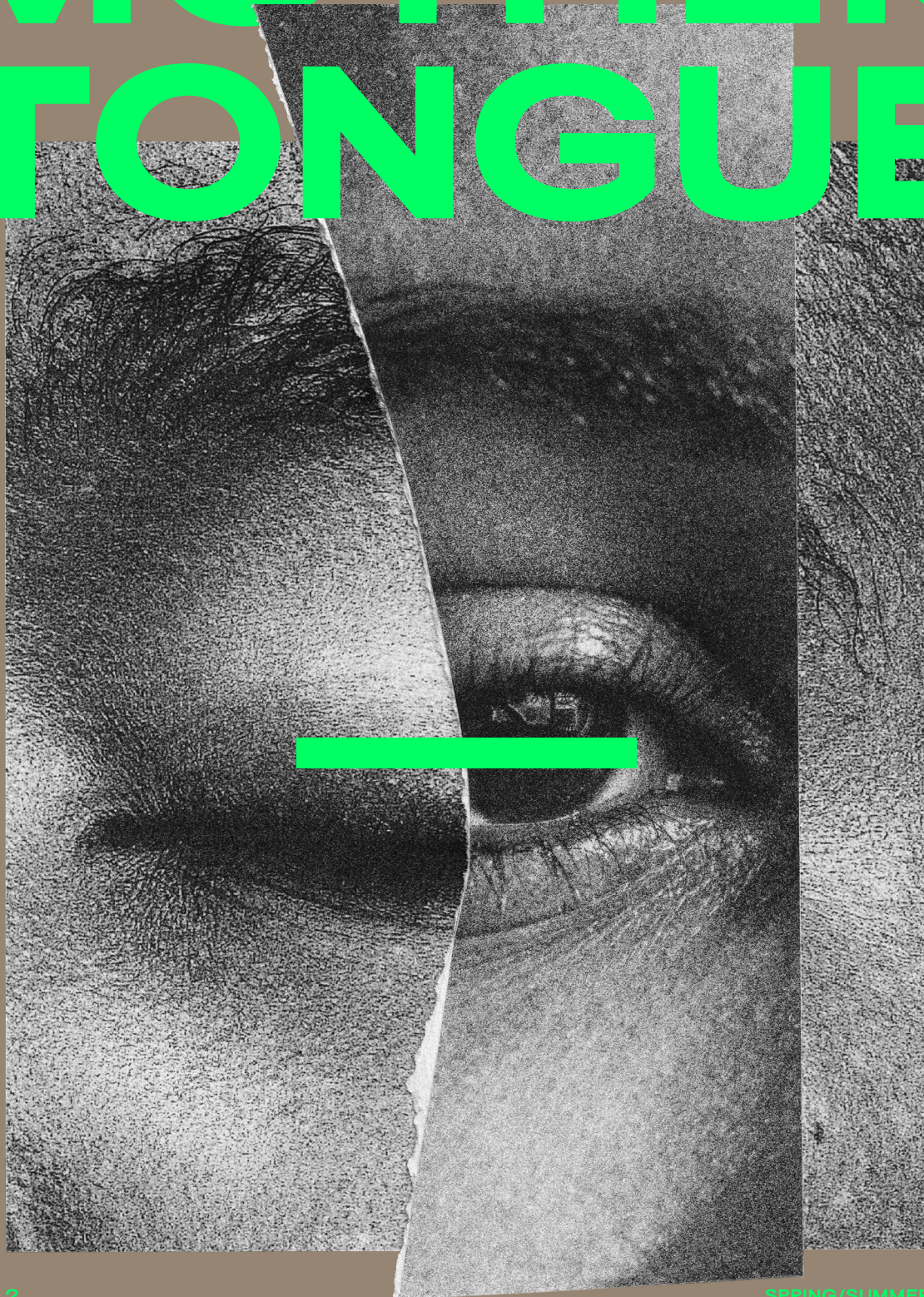


MOTHER TONGUE





The First Cut Is the Deepest

BACK IN 1993, when Lorena Bobbitt famously used a kitchen knife to sever her husband John's penis as he slept—then threw it into a grass field in front of a Virginia 7-11 from the window of her speeding car before calling 911 in tears—her justification was that he had beaten and raped her on repeat throughout their entire marriage. At the ensuing trials, she was acquitted on terms of temporary insanity after being diagnosed with battered woman syndrome, a mental health condition defined by the pioneering work of psychologist Lenore E. Walker a mere 15 years before. Curiously, John Bobbitt was likewise found innocent, as at the time, in Virginia, a spouse could be charged with rape only if the couple was living apart or the victim was seriously physically injured, which Lorena wasn't. So instead, she became a household joke. Her case did little to further the national conversation around domestic violence; in fact, it was cited as an example of how far the women's rights movement had come. And for decades, she was the de facto face of crazy bitches everywhere.

Years later, long after John found a new career in porn—starring in *John Wayne Bobbitt Uncut*—I went to a Hootie & the Blowfish concert, wedged between corn fields and mega churches and strip malls back home in Indiana, under a humid sky with lightning on the horizon. I was 9 years old and with my friends from Girl Scouts, chaperoned by some of their mothers, and in the big gravel parking lot after the show, a college-aged, Abercrombie & Fitch cargo-short wearing, drunk man came up to me. I pulled at my concert T-shirt, borrowed from my babysitter, and unknotted it from my waist as he approached. "Hi, I'm Hootie," this boy said, and I didn't know what to do. "Hi, I'm Blowfish?" I replied, my voice rising up to reveal my uncertainty, my T-shirt falling to cover the little slice of my tummy, still round like a baby's. "Blow this fish bitch!" he shouted, as he whipped his dick out and peed on our car. I'd never seen a penis before. And I'd never associated one with violence and disrespect, with a perversion of my sense of self. Aside from the jokes I'd heard about Lorena, I'd never considered how a dick could be considered so dangerous and shocking that a woman might end up cutting it off.

Outwardly, I laughed it off, interpreting my feelings of embarrassment and mild horror as something to feel silly about—me, a kid with no clear understanding of what a penis was for. This became a story I got to tell at camp and slumber parties, and to girls a grade ahead of us. But this general pattern—a man pulling the rug out from under me, a man surprising me with a weaponized penis, a man as a symbol of a whole culture controlled by men and their desires, constantly pulling the rug out from under all of us, sometimes with our own complicity and sometimes without—left me broken and confused about what I deserved in sexual relationships, by the time I was living alone in the world, old enough to have a sex life.

In my 20s, I battled culturally sanctioned assaults—being groped in bars or coerced into sex or lied to about intentions or not given the respect of direct communication. I experienced objectification of my body via degrading comments toward me and other women from every man around me—college friends and strangers on the street and guys I went on dates with—and in advertisements, on TV and in films. (*Wedding Crashers* told us all that funny behavior for men would be to lie in order to imply their trustworthiness, then to use that trust to persuade women to have sex with them.)

As I turned 30 and became more empowered by virtue of age and a stable relationship, I thought the worst was behind me. But I was in shambles after the birth of my child, an experience that seemed to explode all of my trauma. I felt violated at every turn, suffering preventable physical pain inflicted on me by my doctor under the guise of medical intervention—followed by her dismissal of my

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When sex becomes
the ultimate symbol of
a misogynistic society,
can you ever really be
in the mood?

pain, as if I was being hysterical. And then there was the labor and recovery, during which I felt betrayed by my own physicality, shocked by how terrifying and intense it had all been, not at all *magical* and *worth it*. Finally, the pressure to breastfeed, combined with the cloud of the still-new Trump presidency, which seemed to mock every aspect of my emotional damage, made it so that the last thing I could imagine was a truly happy hetero sex life, a truly equitable experience with a penis.

How different was my husband, Tom, really, than any of the other men who'd fucked with me? How different was he from the abusive John Bobbitt, the guy at the Hootie concert, the arrogant and moronic Donald Trump? They all had penises, after all, these driving symbols of white, male, cis-hetero entitlement and self-worship, and, in my postpartum worldview, it became hard for me to distinguish between them—all men seemed to fall somewhere on a spectrum of bad to very bad. I wondered often how any woman, recovering from a life this intensely shaped by patriarchy and male toxicity and normalized rape, could ever find a way to enjoy sex.

The culture of the late 1990s and early 2000s—the culture of my youth—seemed dedicated to vilifying women and endorsing their harm, and it wasn't just Lorena. There was Anita Hill and Monica Lewinsky. The aesthetic of heroin chic, which told women they were better off practically disappearing. Britney Spears' "(Hit Me) Baby One More Time" and "I'm a Slave 4 U." All of this seemed to point to one thing: Women's worth was only to be defined by what men thought of them; they were not to be believed or respected as equal and independent beings.

This wasn't new, of course: When my mom was my age the entire world was taught that a young and brilliant artist named Yoko Ono broke up The Beatles: She seduced a man named John Lennon and ruined him and destroyed

his success using her feminine powers. All he had wanted was peace, music and love. She consumed him. He's the one who called her "the world's most famous unknown artist," alluding to a brilliant and important career that was usurped by his own persona.

Two years before they'd ever met, she'd performed a work called *Cut Piece* (1964) where, one by one, viewers were invited to snip pieces of her clothing off and keep the scraps. She sat, silently, calmly, scissors in front of her, later describing that she'd been in a trancelike state as the first trepidatious participants approached her, followed by emboldened participants who removed larger and more provocative pieces of her outfit, exposing a breast or her stomach. She classified this work as a score—art made up of written instructions, that when followed result in an experience or activity. She'd read the score out loud before she started, and then, kneeling at the front of her stage, waited for the audience to do their part. Afterward, when the work was performed in Tokyo and London and Paris, and was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, she explained that it was about subverting the meaning of being an artist, giving pieces away instead of using them in private creation. It was about war, a protest against violence and destruction—the torn clothing and tattered country left after the bombs fell on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Though she wasn't saying it in the '60s, by 2003, at its most recent performance, Ono described it as anti-sexist and anti-ageist, hinting at a feminist underpinning—an idea that drew me in for its relevance in my lived experience, in the ways I felt so taken from by men, by systems run for and designed by them.

Patriarchy grabs so much from us, cuts into us in small and big ways, over and over for entire lifetimes, snipping and snipping, keeping the pieces instead of apologizing and returning them, until there's not much left. And when we cut back,

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either in explosive ways like Lorena Bobbitt, or in small ways, like recoiling from intimacy, it seems to be us—not men, not the systems built to serve them—that are classified as the problem. Ono never screamed, flinched, spoke up or fought when a participant approached her with the scissors. To me, that's the most startling and meaningful part of the piece.

In the years after my son was born, I rarely felt up to having sex, and when I forced myself to, I vacillated afterward between crying quietly—hot tears leaking onto my pillow as I tried not to make any noise, lest I have to explain—or exploding in anger toward Tom for seemingly tiny infractions. Soon, the anticipation of my imminent sorrow or rage made me want to avoid sex completely. When, in response to my disinterest, he tried even harder to get me into bed, I would either refuse in a panic or participate with a strange detachment. Making out was fun, but the minute I saw his penis I'd go numb, start concocting to-do lists in my head, feel a queasy mix of bored and annoyed. As soon as it was over, I'd find a reason to absolutely hate him.

I even came to hate his touch, when, early one morning, I awoke with a jolt at him stroking my breast, from the bottom all the way to the nipple. I could not explain my anger at being disturbed in this way. Tom was my partner; he'd touched my body thousands of times. Still, my fury felt uncontainable. Another time, noticing the flutter of my eyelids, he perched next to me on the bed and pulled my forehead back to expose my neck, kissing it four times in a row, aggressively, so that I felt his scratchy stubble. To him, this was a show of unbridled affection, a warm and loving good morning. Yet anger and panic flooded me again. I hated him for not caring that I was still half asleep, for disrespecting that I require more rest than him; I hated him for thinking he had a right to touch my body while I was

only semi-conscious. Something about the fact that it was my neck, purposefully exposed, made this small action feel like a true violation. And I couldn't get over it—it consumed two therapy sessions and at least as many dinner conversations with girlfriends, and I still felt something simmering under my skin whenever I was close to him. Whatever that burning sensation was, it made me not want to be near him, certainly not in an intimate capacity. Without a clear explanation from me as to why I was avoiding him, something I couldn't quite rationalize, I'm sure he was left bewildered.

Earlier in our relationship, I had made myself have sex with him regularly—equating my value to my husband with my willingness to "enthusiastically" initiate an activity that he prioritized, that I knew played a major role in his mental and emotional health. *If he's not getting it at home, he's getting it somewhere else* echoed in my head, a fear that prevented me from letting on how little I actually enjoyed the activity, how much it reminded me of all the pain I'd ever experienced at the hands of men.

Instead, I convinced myself that this was marital generosity, an act of sacrifice in some ways. And why the heck was I so reluctant to enjoy intimacy, anyway? After all, my husband is hot, cool and funny. He works hard. He's kind, generous and smart. We have a plethora of intellectual interests in common, a shared general worldview and we support each other's goals. We both have large appetites for food, for cocktails, for fun, for culture. It should follow that we deserve to enjoy each other intimately. My vagina should not feel half dead. I should not feel burning hatred for his penis.

The Greek physician Galen of Pergamon, who died in second-century Rome, wrote, "Every animal is sad after coitus except the human female and the rooster," which he didn't get quite right, myself as proof (I can't really speak for roosters). But he did start a persistent conversation that would lead in the 1980s to the diagnosis of a condition called postcoital dysphoria, a counterintuitive psychological reaction to consensual and even enjoyable sex, wherein a participant becomes immensely sad or irritable or some mix of the two right after. It can last for hours. A 2020 study, "Postcoital Dysphoria: Prevalence and Psychological Correlates," approximates that about half of women have experienced it (and many men, too), but no one has cared enough to put resources toward studying why.

I think I understand why it happens to me, and I think it's related to the tiny traumas, the tiny cuts, of living within a patriarchy that doesn't prioritize women's emotional lives, health, consent and respect. And while I do have to give Tom credit—he is not the cause of my trauma, in fact, he goes out of his way to help me heal it—I also find it necessary to hold the truth that, in a society that seems to torment women at every turn, I cannot be the only one who is exhausted, battling my damaged and hijacked sense of sexuality.

Had I known about conditions like postcoital dysphoria earlier, had it been part of our standard discussions on sex, I think I would have been able to identify it in myself. Had I identified it in myself, I think I would have—much sooner—questioned why sex was such a trigger for me. We, as the members of this world who are perpetuating the species at great personal cost, deserve better than to suffer neglected sex lives silently, without normalized explanations for why that may be. We deserve extra care in a culture that cuts away at us, and we deserve for that culture to change.

I cannot be the only one who feels shut down. I cannot be the only one who vacillates between rage and dark sadness about the ways men and male-dominated society have diminished my sense of self. I cannot be the only one. ■