



Grandmother Spider

A woman is hanging out the laundry. Everything and nothing happens. Of her flesh we see only several fingers and a pair of strong brown calves and feet. The white sheet hangs in front of her, but the wind blows it against her body, revealing her contours. It is the most ordinary act, this putting out clothes to dry, though she wears black high heels, as though dressed for something other than domestic work, or as if this domestic work was already a kind of dancing. Her crossed legs look as though they are executing a dance step.

The sun throws her shadow and the dark shadow of the white sheet onto the ground. The shadow looks like a long-legged dark bird, another species stretching out from her feet. The sheet flies in the wind, her shadow flies, and she does all this

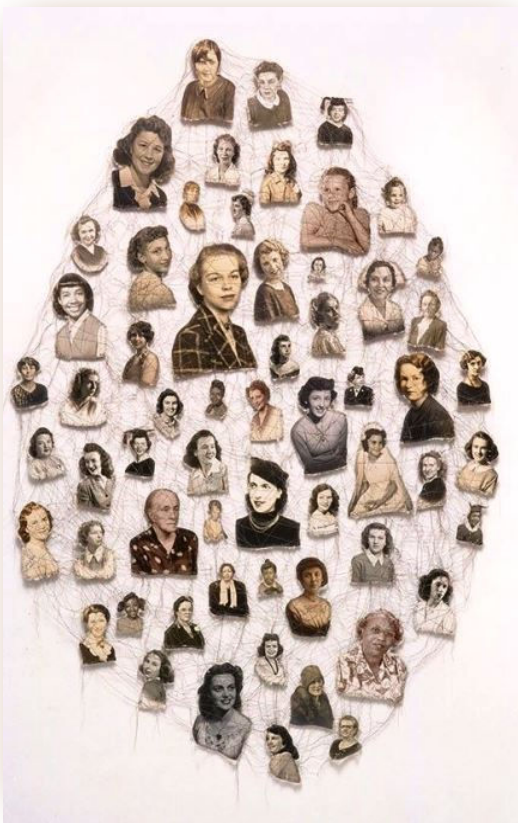
in a landscape so bare and stark and without scale that it's as though you can see the curvature of the Earth on the horizon.

It's the most ordinary and extraordinary act, the hanging out of laundry—and painting. The latter does what the wordless can do, invoking everything and saying nothing, inviting meaning in without committing to any particular one, giving you an open question rather than answers.

Here, in this painting by Ana Teresa Fernandez, a woman both exists and is obliterated.



I think a lot about that obliteration. Or rather that obliteration keeps showing up. I have a friend whose family tree has been traced back a thousand years, but no women exist on it. She just discovered that she herself did not exist, but her brothers did. Her mother did not exist, and nor did her father's mother. Or her mother's mother. There were no grandmothers. Fathers have sons and grandsons and so the lineage goes, with the name passed on; the tree branches, and the longer it goes on the more people are missing: sisters, aunts, mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, a vast population made to disappear on paper and in history.



Her family is from India, but this version of lineage is familiar to those of us in the West from the Bible where long lists of begets link fathers to sons. The strange fourteen-generation genealogy given in the New Testament's Gospel According to Matthew goes from Abraham to Joseph (without noting that God and not Joseph is supposed to be the father of Jesus). The Tree of Jesse—a sort of totem pole of Jesus's patrilineage as given in Matthew—was represented in stained glass and other medieval art and is said to be the ancestor of the family tree.

Thus coherence—of patriarchy, of ancestry, of narrative—is made by erasure and exclusion.

Eliminate your mother, then your two grandmothers, then your four great-grandmothers. Go back more generations and hundreds, then thousands disappear. Mothers vanish, and the fathers and mothers of those mothers. Ever more lives disappear as if unlived until you have narrowed a forest down to a tree, a web down to a line. This is what it takes to construct a linear narrative of blood or influence or meaning.

I used to see it in art history all the time, when we were told that Picasso begat Pollock and Pollock begat Warhol and so it went, as though artists were influenced only by other artists.



There are other ways women have been made to disappear. There is the business of naming. In some cultures women keep their names, but in most their children take the father's name, and in the English-speaking world until very recently, married women were addressed by their husbands' names, prefaced by Mrs. You stopped, for example, being Charlotte Brontë and became Mrs. Arthur Nicholls.

Names erased a woman's genealogy and even her existence. This corresponded to English law, as Blackstone enunciated it in 1765:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing; and is therefore called in our law-French a femme-covert . . . or under the protection and influence of her husband, her baron, or lord; and her condition during her marriage is called her coverture. For this reason, a man cannot grant anything to his wife, or enter into covenant with her: for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence.

He covered her like a sheet, like a shroud, like a screen. She had no separate existence.



There are so many forms of female nonexistence. Early in the war in Afghanistan, the New York Times Sunday magazine ran a cover story on the country. The big image at the head of the story was supposed to show a family, but I saw only a man and children, until I realized with astonishment that what I had taken for drapery or furniture was a fully veiled woman. She had disappeared from view, and whatever all the other arguments may be about veils and burkas, they make people literally disappear.

Veils go a long way back. They existed in Assyria more than three thousand years ago, when there were two kinds of women, respectable wives and widows who had to wear veils, and prostitutes and slave girls who were forbidden to do so. The veil was a kind of wall of privacy, the marker of a woman for one man, a portable architecture of confinement.

Less portable kinds of architecture kept women confined to houses, to the domestic sphere of housework and childrearing, and so out of public life and incapable of free circulation.

In so many societies, women have been confined to the house to control their erotic energies, necessary in a patrilineal world so that fathers could know who their sons were and construct their own lineage of begats.



When I was young, women were raped on the campus of a great university and the authorities responded by telling all the women students not to go out alone after dark or not to be out at all. Get in the house. (For women, confinement is always waiting to envelope you.)

Some pranksters put up a poster announcing another remedy, that all men be excluded from campus after dark. It was an equally logical solution, but men were shocked at being asked to disappear, to lose their freedom to move and participate, all because of the violence of one man.

It is easy to name the disappearances of the Dirty War as crimes, but what do we call the millennia of disappearances of women, from the public sphere, from genealogy, from legal standing, from voice, from life? According to the project *Ferite a Morte* (Wounded to Death), organized by the Italian actress Serena Dandino and her

colleagues, about sixty-six thousand women are killed by men annually, worldwide, in the specific circumstances they began to call “femicide.”

Most of them are killed by lovers, husbands, former partners, seeking the most extreme form of containment, the ultimate form of erasure, silencing, disappearance. Such deaths often come after years or decades of being silenced and erased in the home, in daily life, by threat and violence.

Some women get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear. Every woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would have her disappear. She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law. The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt.



You can tell so many stories about a woman hanging out the laundry—putting clothes on the line is a pleasurable task at times, a detour into the light. You can also tell many kinds of stories about the mysterious form all tangled up with a bedsheet in Ana Teresa Fernandez’s painting. Ana Teresa Fernandez’s image on that canvas is six feet tall, five feet wide, the figure almost life-size.

Though it is untitled, the series it’s in has a title: Telaraña. Spiderweb. The spiderweb of gender and history in which the painted woman is caught; the spiderweb of her own power that she is weaving in this painting dominated by a sheet that was woven. Woven now by a machine, but before the industrial revolution by women whose spinning and weaving linked them to spiders and made spiders feminine in the old stories.

In the creation stories of the Hopi, Pueblo, Navajo, Choctaw, and Cherokee peoples, Spider Grandmother is the principal creator of the universe. Ancient Greek stories included an unfortunate spinning woman who was famously turned into a spider as well as the more powerful Greek fates, who spun, wove, and cut each person’s lifeline, who ensured that those lives would be linear narratives that end.

Spiderwebs are images of the nonlinear, of the many directions in which something might go, the many sources for it; of the grandmothers as well as the strings of begats.

There's a German painting from the nineteenth century of women processing the flax from which linen is made. They wear wooden shoes, dark dresses, demure white caps, and stand at various distances from a wall, where the hanks of raw material are being wound up as thread. From each of them, a single thread extends across the room, as though they were spiders, as though it came right out of their bellies. Or as though they were tethered to the wall by the fine, slim threads that are invisible in other kinds of light. They are spinning, they are caught in the web.

To spin the web and not be caught in it, to create the world, to create your own life, to rule your fate, to name the grandmothers as well as the fathers, to draw nets and not just straight lines, to be a maker as well as a cleaner, to be able to sing and not be silenced, to take down the veil and appear: all these are the banners on the laundry line I hang out.

