

I Am Not Quiet

I am not quiet. I am not still. Anyone who thinks I have ever been either doesn't know me well. The four-year-old me decided that shy was no fun, and I haven't stopped making noise since. Soon after my loud declaration, I was given my first needle, my first yarn, my first canvas on which to depict whatever it was that I couldn't—or wouldn't—silence.

Understand—I am not always talking, though it feels that way sometimes. I am singing, tapping out rhythms, strumming away too. Often my body is making no audible noise. Then, the sound continues in my head. The soundtrack is so loud that it invades each of my dreams, which can themselves be deafening, but are often beautiful. I suspect that if you cradled my head to your ear as if it were a conch shell, and listened close, you would hear not the sea, but a barn dance. And somehow I'd be singing, playing the tune, calling the dance, drumming out the rhythms with my flickering feet, and having a conversation in some corner, all at the one time. This clatter and tune that is in my head is me, and I am not quiet. I am not still.

The needles saved my aunts, mother, grandmother, some of their sanity. They focused the chattering tot in a peaceful direction. Judy, the needle-giving aunt who fills so many of my best memories, taught me stitches because she saw how much I loved hers. She taught me stitches because her beloved Grandmother had taught her stitches, and it only seemed right. She taught me stitches because she loved me. She taught me that a bad stitch was best removed and replaced by a better stitch—the kindest of cruelties one stitcher can teach another. And she taught me that I could make anything I wanted to make, and that she would find it beautiful. She told the truth.

First, it was embroidery. I stitched flowers, animals, seas, letters, trees. The women in my family lauded my work, saying how like my Great-grandmother I was, and how her needles had crocheted enough lace to cover the mountains outside. My needlework let me converse with this great woman whom time had kept from me, and with the women she had known and the children she had fed and clothed and loved, who now did the same for me, thanks to her. These women were never quiet, and they were never still. I strove to be like them, and eventually I was.

From the embroidery, I took to larger, more practical stitching. I sewed costumes, skirts, dresses, curtains, coats. I clothed friends, counting the garments I had made for their beloved backs and fearing that I hadn't made enough. I saw they needed belts, and so I sought out weaving friends for lessons and soon wove belts. I saw they needed bags and hoods and so I learned to work with hides. I feared they were cold so I stitched all of my scraps together into quilts. I noticed they were quiet sometimes, so I wove them songs and knitted them stories, and in all of them some ghost of me appeared, needles in hand. The sounds in my head leaked out to them, and some of them called it beautiful. And I knew I was loved.

One needle wasn't enough, and I sought friends with two needles, and asked their help. My first attempts at knitting frustrated me: the needles cold and the yarn willful. I cursed and fretted over my failures, accustomed to easy skill. One friend carved needles out of antler, another friend gave them to me. The spell their kindness cast enchanted my hands into knitting. I made scarves for my Aunts and Mother, to warm their honeyed throats. I made the wonkiest, saddest mistake of a hat, and a friend accepted it lovingly, still wears it proudly on her bright head. She is not quiet. She is not still. She is teaching me to spin, so I can knit the yarn we spin for our youngest new friends, many of whom were born to other women who make things because they want someone else to know warmth and love. And many of whom make things because they must, because they are not quiet. They are not still.

You have pictured needle workers incorrectly. Conjure up an image of us from history—you imagine us quiet. We are not quiet. They were not quiet. They were not still. Arachne was cursed—or blessed even—with spider's legs because she was not quiet. She crowed about the beauty of her work. And even after she was twisted into a small voiceless thing, she was not quiet. She wove away, and let her weaving do her yelling for her. The Bayeaux Tapestry was stitched by loud women—this I guarantee—to depict the victories of men who failed to honor their mothers well enough. Betsy Ross was not quiet. She was a revolutionary. Suffragettes and labor organizers knitted and embroidered their protests while they were imprisoned. Mother Jones, loudest of Grandmothers, was an accomplished seamstress. I imagine every stitch on every dress she ever made echoing with her booming voice. The women of Gee's Bend were loud, fast moving, and hard-working. They hadn't the luxury of stillness. Remember that when you stare at their work hanging in hushed galleries.

I will not be quiet or still until I am dead. I have finally learned that my own internal clamor is a fine gift. I will lay my ideas and songs down on paper, I will chant out my words and sing out my tunes and hope the sound pleases someone else. And I will stitch my thoughts and prayers into things I hope will last, so some other girl will see my work and know that her own loud head is good, and she will relish her own sweet noise.

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