

# Battle Hymn of My Broken Spirit

Grace Tully

*A response to the recent parietal vote, to the conflicting generational attitudes surrounding sexuality, to the lack of clear-cut consequences for student perpetrators of sexual violence and to the near-total absence of sexual education on campus.*

IT WAS A THURSDAY afternoon, back when I edited for the Commentary section of *The Phillipian*. I was sitting in the newsroom and wishing I were somewhere else (this always meant that I was writing an editorial). Others in the newsroom told me to keep myself under control: don't criticize too harshly, don't use strong language, and for god's sake, don't use the phrase "male entitlement." I told the other editors I couldn't do it: that it was too nauseating, that it had seemed so much easier before I had known that there were sixty-seven of them. They told me they were behind deadline, and counting on me. I told them I would write it.

**This is my best and most abhorrent art form:** learning to tiptoe around issues with-

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out being labeled "militant," learning that journalistic neutrality means writing some empty words about positive leadership instead of addressing the roots of issues, and learning from *The Phillipian's* 2014 State of the Academy that 67 students have been sexually assaulted here at Andover either "on campus, off campus, or both."

**This is humiliation:** speaking on panels and forums, in meetings and interpersonal conversations about my feminism, my queerness, my disgust for elite male culture, and my opposition to the new parietal restrictions. Feeling viscerally and inescapably my own experiences with assault and harassment, remember-



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ing my close friends' reports of abuse and rape, noticing my hands and voice and confidence tremble, knowing that I could never find words strong enough to be seen as more than another one of those hormonal, entitled teenagers.

**This is devastation:** reading on *The Phillipian's* website a comment from a member of our faculty, using the veil of anonymity to insist that, "This is not a brothel. This is an amazing place of learning. Students should desire and aspire to come here to learn from amazing teachers and with amazing peers, not so they can frequent the Sex-Room." I scrolled down in disbelief as my mentors and educators - at times the closest thing to family that I have had - compared me to a prostitute and questioned my commitment to learning in their comments. Hearing from the people that mattered most, that I made them feel "like a pimp."

**This is debilitation:** watching my own writing collapse and grow disjointed because there are no words for what I am communicating now. Knowing that nothing I write can give a person's body back to them. Conforming to the

muteness and the denial, submitting silently to the specter of shame and subjugation running its fingertips over the core of my being. Clinging to the numbness of neutrality by writing something civil and painstakingly circumspect. Giving the audience what they want to read - not what they should read, and never what they need to read.

**This is violence:** 67 violated bodies and a desire to disappear. This is the visceral terror of walking down sidewalks

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under dim lights alone, crossing the street at the first sign of trouble without waiting for cars to stop, because you honestly believe that you are better off dead than sorry. This is learning to hate your own body, wishing you could wear a

pair of summer shorts without "asking for it," that your legs were not quite as long so that you could walk into a school dance without wondering whether or not you'll be safe. This is the evening of prom, when your friends tell you that you look beautiful and also to be afraid.

**This is mutilation:** the loss of identity and bodily autonomy, the inconceivable struggle of learning to love what is left. Your safety is a privilege and their pleasure is a right, and they will tear you open and apart in every known sense of each word. Reading sexual violence statistics with no semblance of surprise, feeling nothing but a dull sense of horror so constant as to actually be anesthetized by its own omnipresence. Hearing the insidious, terrifyingly common suggestion that women must "take some responsibility" for attacks upon their selfhood and their flesh, and rarely intervening anymore because these conversations are long and never fail to leave you feeling scared and sick and tired. You learn to accept that there is not a place in the world where you will be safe to put your drink down.

**This is Andover:** where I saw that 67 boxes had checked "yes" in a survey, where I cried after every hopeless effort to contest the new parietal rules, where I started to wonder why private school students - including male private school students - live and behave the way that they do. This is Andover, where I am one brothel comparison away from losing my mind. This is where I realized that I would only fully heal when the faculty, administration and legislation of Andover no longer viewed my sexuality and my intelligence as mutually exclusive. This is where I finally accepted that it might never happen.

Every woman who is one with her truth and her power is haunted by the selfsame specter of a thought-will my time and my efforts here have mattered? Were the pain and the opposition justified? Have I made my mark? Was it worth it? The answer is different for all of us, but for me, it will forever be bound to whether or not this academy ever learns to respect the women who came here seeking knowledge and truth.

Andover is where I became

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one with my bisexuality, where I accepted the burdens and joys of my feminism and where I learned to write. The history of my mind and body is joined with the past, the present, and the future of this institution, and I am forever awaiting the day when that nightmarish 67 is permanently reduced to a static and unthreatening zero.

Only then will I consider my time here to have been worth anything at all.

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