

As Roe falls, a 1789 painting of grieving women brings unlikely solace

At a time of restricted rights, war and rising violence, Jacques-Louis David's 'Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons' makes feeling the pain look brave

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The U.S. Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* will have deeply personal, frighteningly physical consequences. And immediate reactions have been visceral. On social media, those devastated by the news reported [ghost period cramps](#), [nausea](#) and [headaches](#). When I heard, my throat tightened and I suddenly felt heavier, like you might in a car accelerating too quickly.

Even as this intense emotion makes its presence known in our bodies, we are told it is only in our heads. After the ruling, the naysayers piled on quickly, deriding the strong responses as “hysterical” or framing them as overreactions. For many women, this sort of criticism is all too familiar. We are used to our emotions being dismissed, mocked or used against us, considered a sign of weakness.

This could be why during these difficult, seemingly regressive times, I turned to an unlikely place: an 18th-century representation of women overcome with emotion. At first glance, Jacques-Louis David's 1789 “[The Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of His Sons](#)” might seem like it only bolsters sexist stereotypes. Depicting one of the first Roman consuls sitting in shadows as his officers bring in the corpses of his two sons — whom he had executed for alleged treason — the painting is propaganda, made to glorify sacrifice on the eve of the French Revolution. On the left, the stoical Brutus is the hero, while the grieving women on the right embody the perils of letting feelings get the best of you. Or so the story goes.

But if that was David's point, I wasn't convinced, even after seeing the work in person — during a trip to the Louvre earlier this year. As spring gave way to this dark summer, those women kept coming back to me. As I heard about [bereaved mothers of shooting victims](#), I returned to this image of bold, full-bodied anguish. Amid calls to protect women and children during the war in Ukraine, I couldn't help thinking that so often women, like those in “The Lictors,” are the ones *doing* the protecting — by bearing the emotional burden for everyone else.

And when *Roe* was overturned, I found validation in their warrior-like approach to emotion — how the women in the painting made giving one's body over to anger, shock and grief look not weak, but brave. How through the act of feeling, they seemed to claim their bodies as their own.

The first time I saw “The Lictors” was under very different circumstances: late at night, on a computer screen in my college dorm room. It was the semester that New York City seemed too loud, the neoclassical architecture on campus too cold, my days too regimented and home too far away. My angst might have been better soothed with nostalgic pop songs or a sad movie. Instead, I turned to Brutus's dead son's feet.

I couldn't stop looking at them: long, white, bony toes; feet bound in sandals, walking moments ago, now hovering above the scene, graced by celestial light. You can't see much more of the figure's body, so the feet take on this strange duality: They are oddly specific, like a persistent detail of a traumatic memory, but they are also anonymous, underscored by the way the Roman officers just carry the bodies off, with a procedural apathy.

The feet lingered in my mind like an out-of-context lyric you interpret as your own. To me, they represented the big parts of life that vanish with little ceremony — the door on your childhood bedroom closed for the last time, the friend you say goodbye to casually, only to lose touch for good.

After college, I wouldn't really *see* “The Lictors” again until years later, when I visited Paris for the first time this spring. Displayed on the crowded walls of the Louvre's 19th-century French paintings gallery, near “Liberty Leading the People,” and across from “The Coronation of Napoleon,” the painting crept up on me. I stopped, startled, like I had run into someone from my past.

It's not simply that art is more powerful in person. This was different. The painting tells a story about the body through the body. The story stretches from the muscular biceps of the servant in the corner, suggesting grief is a weight she has lifted before, to Brutus's tense brows and bunched-up toes, struggling to maintain a bearable numbness.

Then there is the trio of tormented women. At the Louvre, peering up at the youngest daughter, who has fainted upon the sight of her brothers' corpses, you can practically feel the blood draining from her head, the breath emptying from her lungs, the sensation shrinking from her arms. You have an urge to, like the daughter in the center, throw your hands in front of your face and pivot in the opposite direction — as if you can outrun the reality happening before your eyes. Looking at the mother lunging toward her sons, you can sense the propulsive power of emotion extending across the canvas; the way it can move through your body and stir you to action — if you are courageous enough to endure it.

For a society so enamored with vulnerability and self-care, we remain fearful of emotion. We cringe at tears, tiptoe around grief, cushion blows to our fragile composure with jokes. Unironic emotion is weak at best, grotesque at worst, and always to be hidden.

If we take cues from this painting — where stoicism has been pushed to the shadows, leaving emotion in the light — we might revere not those who simply carry on with their duties in the wake of trauma and injustice, but those who interrupt them. We might find that the hierarchy that places reason above all else is a faulty one, weak as the fabric dividing the two spheres of this canvas.

And as rights are restricted in a post-*Roe* reality, instead of regarding our emotions with skepticism or shame, we might embrace them with head-lifting, spine-straightening pride. In those fierce reactions, there is a reminder: Your body, which feels so fully, is yours.

