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# a n a t o m y



**anatomy by Defunkt Magazine**

Published by Blurb

[www.defunktmag.com](http://www.defunktmag.com)

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Cover Art by Morphic Rooms

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Printed in United States of America

Summer Issue 2022

# anatomy



**DEFUNKT MAGAZINE**

Summer 2022

# masthead

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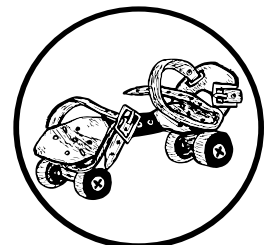
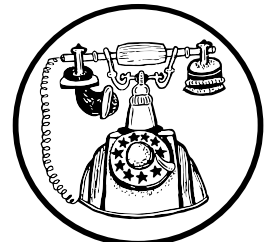
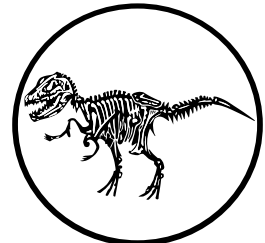
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# articulation point iii

morphic rooms





# anatomical anatomy

pragya dhiman

her body, the warzone  
isn't hers.

like a good democracy,  
it is the people's and they will decide  
what to do with it.  
barter, quarter, touch or see.  
burn it. rape it. drown it in the sea. spoilt  
rotting carcass, cured in salt. impure flesh,

kissing the sun it burns  
fire hot, like a witch's hide, she's a hag with a womb  
full of blood, a crime. a legacy *must* be left behind.

death loves her, hair knotted in a hoop,  
  
imprisoned

the body is weak, but the mind isn't  
fear the ugly feminine  
the cunning deceiver. the charming woman  
who knows better  
than to leave the eye of the hurricane  
or live in the eye of the hungry falcon.

and tonight,

all she did was go to bed but now she is sentenced to death.  
she was diseased, they declared, and the plague must be  
put to an end. wildfires like these will burn man's crops,  
hell's fury abound, with the unnatural around, god wills  
you cannot cheat a family out of the duties he preached about.

but don't worry if you disagree,  
women will always have the luxury to sleep  
six feet underground  
somewhere they will never be found.

# lived-in

najla brown

He reminded me of home, so I moved in. Hung my art on his eyelashes. Pushed my bed against his left lung. His inhales provided just the right amount of breeze in the summer. The steady movement rocked me to sleep as the sounds of Rob Thomas reverberated in his rib cage. He couldn't really sing, but I didn't care enough to file a noise complaint. I knew what a bargain he was. The amenities were the best part: food, transportation, emergency support. He had everything.

I even made sure he didn't smoke before moving in. I know from experience you can never get the smell of nicotine out of the sheets or your head. He was the perfect host. So good, we held dinner parties in his stomach. My mother raved about his cooking, and his mother loved what I'd done with the place as I ran my hand across the cubby holes I installed where his belly fat used to be. I'd really fixed him up, and together, we filled each orifice with our favorite things until movie tickets and tennis gear began to spill onto the floor, forcing us to start tucking things under the bed and in his atriums. We filled his heart until the beating slowed into a dull drone.

His corneas, which used to be my sunroom, became a shrine to worn-out shoes. We removed his teeth to make space for more concert stubs, but the weight of the paper became so heavy in his mouth that he couldn't move his tongue. Whole sections of him became uninhabitable as more things called his body home. Dust settled as rooms went unopened and uncared for. Even the type began to fade on the receipts as they became confetti for a party we'd never throw.

I shuffled around lolling tennis balls in his arteries. Each hoped to embrace the laces of a racket once more, but there was no more embracing—or sleeping. I lay awake at night, hiding under the covers while his shallow breaths whipped the ripped paper into a frenzy. It reminded me of the twisters from back home. He became a body filled with so much love it left me with no room to grow.



# i'm something of a scientist myself

gretchen rockwell

## Background

I don't say this because I have written about black holes, carcinization, iridescence, narwhals, acacias, prehistoric birds, etc.—though I have //

## Hypothesis

My constant questioning // identity / is always in flux / like energy flowing as photons / through space

## Variables/Control of Variables

I used to dream of being / a marine biologist, studying chittering dolphins / or deep-sea fish—dream of descending / into the lightless sea till I could believe I was / the only human in the world // in second grade I helped design a diorama of a kelp forest / a crinkled streamer each stem, carefully colored / fish dotting each layer // I wanted to feel real / leaves sweep my cheeks, hair clouding undersea / like a mermaid or a dream // I wanted it so much / I could scream—

— & like waking from chloroform / that ambition was released, discarded by cold reality // perhaps in a parallel universe—though I don't know // that's for the physicists to figure // all I can decipher / is why my trachea constricts when I discover something / previously unknown

## Method

I investigate myself thoroughly / probe & dissect / each thought & motivation // everything slides / under the microscope // I reject panaceas & placebos / delving into what they cannot cure

## Data

[caught in—

—the absence, everything]

## Conclusion

Any discovery exists to be explained // hypotheses hover patiently & conclusions will be drawn / in time // give anything enough time & it will evolve / fractals fracturing old explanations // a good scientist knows how to watch / & wait / & later / write what it all means

# melting in the place of half-sunshine

nikitha nair



# post-op

cara peterhansel

This time, my legs can swing over  
the side of the table. I present my knee  
to be appraised. Look how well it can bend.  
Look how this piece you put in me  
fits into its slot now, shaken down like  
a puzzle piece into its grooves.

Look how my quadricep, anemic hourglass,  
fires itself to lift from the paper of the table.  
Can you see this? Look how the scars are silvering.

I can walk now, though maybe not down slippery  
stairs, or, ok, maybe not across the ice.

But look how it steps up a stair! How tall  
I can stand, how I can tsutsu my tiptoes  
in the body echo of a ballerina.

Maybe when it's over, if it's over, I'll dance.

# the body is a horror classic

leticia urieta

## *Finding the culprit*

In John Carpenter's 1982 sci-fi horror classic, *The Thing*, a group of American researchers are attacked by an alien life form that can imitate other life forms and transform into them, feeding off of their bodies. When the alien is mid-transformation, it takes on a hybrid body made up of all of the life forms that it has consumed to survive.

In one pivotal scene, Kurt Russel's character, MacReady, tests the blood of each of his teammates to see which of them might be the alien in disguise. He heats a metal wire with a flamethrower because the creature reacts to heat, and then presses it into a petri dish filled with each person's blood. His team members wait with bated breath as their blood sizzles against the hot wire, until one teammate's turn comes and his blood explodes out of the petri dish in a violent reaction to being exposed as the real monster.

I love this scene for how it depicts both what is hidden in the body and what can be so easily revealed. If only there were such a simple blood test to confirm so many maladies of the nerves, the muscles, the brain and the unspoken things that live inside.

The alien, the "Thing," is the antagonist, the monster in the horror film, but what is most terrifying about this film is how easily this alien creature invades and takes over the bodies of others to the point that they do not know that they are becoming a hybrid thing capable of swallowing their teammates whole. It is a film about how the alien sows discord and distrust among the team to the point of violence, but it is also a film about how easily we can lose the ability to trust our own bodies.

This has been my life for six years, navigating a neurological headache condition that gradually progressed to a debilitating point where I need daily preventative medication and ongoing care to be able to function from day to day. Even with imaging and diagnosis, doctors I work with cannot give me an answer as to why I have daily pain and migraine episodes that can last for days. Was there an injury to my brain stem or is there a blood vessel pressing against my trigeminal nerve that sets off the pain? Was the nerve damaged by a virus? Or, is this neuropathic pain? Where my brain has forgotten how to not be in pain and my neural pathways only know how to send false alarms. I cannot pinpoint the moment when my body was overtaken by this unknown force, I can only care for it like the beautiful monster that it is.

There is no shortage of films, television, comics and horror media that depict the real and imagined hor-

rors of inhabiting a body. Some of them are exploitative and often miss the point of body horror entirely, which is to show that what we fear the most, that our bodies will age, change, decay and die without our consent. This is not supernatural at all but a reality. What makes these stories successful is not how much they make people cringe or want to shut their eyes, but how they make people understand that we are all vulnerable, something that people who live with chronic illness and disabilities know all too well.

We know that there are often not clear cut blood tests, radiological imaging and solutions that lead directly to a straightforward diagnosis and treatment. Sometimes diagnosis can take years, if they ever come at all, and a body in pain, a sick body without a solution, is exhausting to healthy bodies. Nothing has made this more clear than living through the Coronavirus pandemic with no end in sight. Countless apocalyptic horror films depict life after a virus has swept the world and killed millions, but not how governments and societies abandon those most vulnerable to fend for themselves. The kind of discord sown by not knowing who is vaccinated, who will be wearing a mask, who takes your safety as a vulnerable person seriously, is one small horror story after another that happens every single day.

### *Sinkholes*

Carmen Maria Machado is a master of creating stories that show how patriarchy, trauma and violence can transform a woman's body. In her graphic novel, *The Low Low Woods*, women of the town "Shudder to Think," are continuously transforming into hybrid creatures in response to the violence and forced amnesia visited on them by the men of the town who would seek to harm and control them.

One of the characters transforms into a deer-person, another teen girl becomes a living sinkhole, her trauma an inherited pain from her mother as her body opens a hole to the earth.

When I trace the origins of my sinkholes in some of my old journals in an attempt to learn where everything started, when my headaches began, I find an entry that charts the second year of my graduate program, the peak of my physical and mental exhaustion in a program that was called "community" but felt like a place where my energy was being swallowed whole. On the page, I have noted an assault, a violation by a man in an authoritative role. I remember clearly, the next semester, trying to drive the hour to campus from my home to meet a professor I was assisting and having to pull over into the parking lot of a motel to vomit over the side of my car door from the pain throbbing in my left temple. In the six years since that first headache that stopped me in my tracks, I had always looked to the pain as a problem in my body to solve and not a place where chronic stress, exhaustion and the subtle violences of academia unlocked the dormant pain in me.

In the graphic novel, Vee and El are two best friends who are on a mission to discover what happened to them on a night that they can't remember and how to help the other women in the town who have been violated by the men there. They are able to find a mushroom that causes the forgetting to begin with and one that makes a person remember their trauma. In the end, they leave it up to the women they encounter to choose to remember, or to live in the forgetting.

The elixir of remembering is to document, to resist forgetting, and to make peace with the one and only body I have.

### *Point of no return*

Sometimes pain is a quiet invitation, starting behind the eye and slowly spreading out to the other regions of my face. Sometimes it is a scream through the body. Sometimes sleep is the only place where pain cannot follow me.

Other pains come and go. The prick of a needle to start an IV, sore ankles from wearing the wrong shoes, cramps and indigestion, but this pain is the only pain I can recognize like the voice of a growing storm as it rides in underneath my skin and makes a home in my body.

I have lain in bed during a headache so intense I wanted to scream, to scratch out my own eyes, to do anything for relief. When the pain comes, the last place I want to be is in my body. Pain can strip away the limitations of shame, where my insecurities about the sweat collecting in the rolls of my tummy or my mussed, stale hair after being in bed for two days are wiped from my brain.

I have felt a magnitude of pain that crescendoed to a space where there was no pain, like I was transcending beyond the feeling and I could experience something untouchable across portals, across time. I felt energy and life running through me like pure fuel, and if I didn't calm my body I would burst into flames and burn alive in my bed, in my house with me in it.

This kind of pain is not dissociation. There is no relief in these moments. There is only the higher consciousness that comes with understanding that pain has ripped you open and laid bare the most truthful, screaming you.

### *Bloody transformation*

When werewolves transform in films, their bodies come undone. Sometimes this transformation happens beneath the skin; knuckles expanding, bones breaking and swelling, hair sprouting. Other times, the wolf inside the person bursts through their skin and they are made anew. In all of these depictions and stories, the transformation is excruciating. But pain leads to power. The ability to defend oneself, and to inflict harm, to release what has been fighting to get out.

In some of my favorite monster shows and films like *Supernatural*, *Penny Dreadful* and even the very campy *Van Helsing*, transformation into the werewolf, the monster within, is both violent and inevitable.

These kinds of transformations are the closest I have come to seeing how the body is capable of tearing itself apart and surviving, the violence internal, a form of care.

When I miscarried, I couldn't look away from the blood gushing out of my body, over my underwear, even running down my leg and smearing across the bathroom floor, so much blood that my protective animal brain told me that I was dying, though my body was reacting exactly as it should to the four pills that I swallowed to begin the process of releasing the contents of my pregnancy, my not yet but still mine baby who the doctor told us was not growing, and had no "heartbeat," the fluttering electrical pulse of growing life.

The feeling of clumps of tissue slipping out from inside of me were what I wanted, to rid my body of a not alive baby who was not yet a baby and never would be. At six in the morning, I felt the most intense



cramp that sent me running to the bathroom just in time to feel the largest bit of tissue burn through me and plop into the toilet. Sweating, with tears in my eyes, I cleaned myself as best I could and looked down into the toilet at the full blood moon floating in the toilet water. Why do I want to immediately call it a moon? Does calling it a moon make it sound more sacred, more tied to the natural ebbs and flows of what can happen to the body? After a time, when my heartbeat slowed and my clammy hands stopped shaking, I forced myself to flush the toilet, leaving behind no trace.

I envy the monsters in the monster movie for their transformation, their ability to be torn open and become something more than they are, their pain, their scar tissue healed instantaneously through the power of monster magic. They are not left with remnants and scar tissue that reminds us of how transformation and the creation of life can go horribly, horribly wrong.

### *The Madwoman stays home*

Bodies, like houses, can be haunted. The houses are described like faces looking out onto the world, the windows are eyes staring out, the door an open, gaping mouth. In the Netflix adaptation of the *Haunting of Hill House*, the infamous Red Room is described at first as the heart of the house, and then as the stomach that digests the family and their pain, leaving nothing but broken spirits behind.

In other stories, there is only one person that haunts the house, the woman who has been locked inside, or who cannot leave, having nowhere else to go. She is mad, or disfigured, bed ridden, her torment a contagion that must be kept from the eyes of others.

But then a virus spreads, a pandemic ravages the globe, a country, a community. In a time of social isolation, now she is not the only one.

Now, she is no longer the old crone, the sickbed wife, the unhinged woman in the attic, the witch who chases children from her front lawn covered in weeds. She is simply the woman in pain who stays inside to heal, to prevent more pain, and though the world rages and cries around her, there is something about being at home that allows her to retrace her steps, to remember the self that she once was, and remake the self she is now.

The world slows down, the world is grieving for the dead of now and the dead of the past and the living blood and bones of this world and so she sees that grief is remembering when no one else wants to. She sits in her hammock, she reads the beautiful words of others, she tries to write down some of her own and makes a sanctuary out of small loves at home.

### *Unearthing*

Damage lingers. There is still so much that I am learning about what the body holds onto.

After my miscarriage, I had a D&C, the surgery to clear my uterus of the contents of my pregnancy, the one that would allow my uterus to become a blank slate. Without knowing it for two years, this procedure caused scar tissue to grow in the wake of the scraping of tissue. This reaction is called Asherman's Syndrome. The scar tissue had grown to the point of blocking my fallopian tubes, causing infertility.

A hysteroscopy with the possibility of more procedures to clear this scar tissue from my uterus was necessary to make this chronically ill body a home for another being where it can grow. As the doctor described the procedure to me in her sterile white exam room and how my case was more “severe,” I pictured her sawing away at a coral reef, a colony of growth inside me. My body has healed in its own way, protecting me and impeding me at the same time.

After the surgery, I was shown pictures of the insides of my uterus. Thankfully, my case was less severe than the doctor had originally predicted. Still, I was shocked when I saw that one of the photos showed a small yellow flap of tissue, a piece of placenta that was still adhered to my uterine wall. It sat inside of me for two years, the reminder that our bodies hold onto grief in so many ways.

Struggling with fertility makes you consider what you have to lose, but it is never so simple. There is a deep hope to be able to get pregnant and to have a child safely. In my bones I am terrified to bring a growing being into a body that is unstable. I am afraid of my own pain yes, but I am more afraid of being a mother in pain.

### *Unfurling*

Body horror speaks to our realities; these stories depict being infected, changed without consent, and the loss of control that so many of us feel. What if we told more stories about embracing the monster, the unruliness inside?

In her book, *Women and Other Monsters*, Jess Zimmerman writes about what we can learn from the monstrousness and ugliness of Medusa in Greek myth, “The freedom of ugliness includes the freedom to make a new kind of beauty, a kind that nobody’s thought to denigrate or control—to create it out of your body or blood or out of the dirt or out of the stones of the people you petrify.”

In another life, I am not thinner, or perfectly healthy; I do not even live without pain. In that life, doctors listen and help me to understand the best ways to care for my body. I want nothing more than to embrace the grotesque and beautiful in my living body. I lean my ear close and listen to the whispers of my body through the cracks in the walls.

# medical history

max gillette

Finally given the usual  
clipboard & chewed pen,  
I scan the familiar items

*(Do you have a family history of...)*

& notice a new question  
like a bruise on the pale  
page:

*In the past 12 months, have  
you been physically abused  
(punched, slapped, kicked, etc.)  
by a member of your household?*

I trace faded florid prints  
(wrist, chest, face, neck)  
then remember the purpose  
of my visit. Circle *no*.

Rain pounds like a fist  
against the window. I pray  
(not for the first time)  
that my doctor's exam room is  
soundproof.

# two bulimics walk into a bathroom

francesca leader

The girl bent over the toilet jerks her head around when you open the bathroom door and starts laughing, which you really wish she wouldn't, because it makes vomit specks fly from her viscera red lips, and then you recall picking her out in the wool-and-polyester sweat crush of your roommate's professor's party as the one girl here who didn't just seem prettier than you because of how thin she was, a true beauty who'd be seductive even without the fuck-me boots, the push-up bra, and the flawless feline eyeliner. Apart from the stomach acid skid-mark to one side of her mouth, her skin's perfect. Her shoulder-length, jet-black hair looks real. And her waist can't be more than twenty-five inches—you'd know, because getting your measurements taken in front of the whole ballet class so many times, and watching every other girl get hers taken—gave you an infallible eye. You also learned that anything above twenty-seven inches meant you wouldn't fit into a lot of costumes and, therefore, wouldn't get certain parts and, therefore, would have to accept you were a fat loser, though the skinnier dancers did all they could to reassure you of your amazingness without losing that aura of elegant schadenfreude.

"Fuck me! Thought I locked that," the girl says, wiping the side of her mouth with toilet paper, which she wads up and squeezes. You know from the forced mirth in her tone, the swirl of shame and reproach in her eyes, that it wasn't just some bad macaroni salad from the potluck table (the thing that triggered you, and probably her, too) because buffets and bulimics don't mix. If she's anything like you, she's really an anorexic with shit for willpower.

You lock the door of the half bath that barely contains you both—the door the girl forgot in her rush to purge. She sits on the toilet, looking at you with eyes too bright, like an image with the contrast cranked up, her face trembling between crying and smiling—criling, you decide. Her mascara's running, but even like this, she looks great. You could see this taking an erotic turn, if you were a man. Unfortunately for both of you, you're not.

"Actually came here to do that myself. Do you mind?" you say, with a zany cheer that just seems like what the order doctored right now.

"Fuck, yeah, go ahead!" The girl gets up and jumps out of your way, but doesn't leave. She leans on the sink, close enough to touch your back as you take your turn at the porcelain altar of self-loathing. Surprisingly, you don't get cold feet. Feels almost warm and fuzzy sticking your finger down your throat next to someone who just did the same.

When you're finished, you see she's fixed her mascara. She shifts aside to let you at the sink, but still doesn't leave. She sits back on the toilet, refreshes her lipstick, palpably watching. She offers a restaurant butter mint.

When you take it, she says, “You move like a dancer.”

“I get that a lot. Used to do ballet about twenty pounds ago.”

She croaks a laugh. “About twenty pounds ago, I used to model,” she says, smacking a thigh that could, you’ll admit, be slimmer.

You realize there are things you want to share with her.

“Ever notice how ice cream’s the only thing that tastes as good coming up as it does going down?” you ask.

“Oh, My God,” she says, slapping her cantilevered cleavage. “At least once a week, I get two Blizzards and fucking slam them both.”

“People don’t know it’s an art.”

“Liquids first,” she says, nodding. “And you gotta take small bites, really chew everything well.”

“Pizza’s no good—sticks in your throat like a plug.”

“I don’t even fuck with pizza.” She laughs. “Spaghetti’s great, though. Comes up nice and smooth.”

You laugh, too. Then you start to feel weird. Like the weight of everything you just gorged and disgorged is coming back, rising inside you again, the pressure increasing until it forces tears from your eyes. One more second, and your heart might crack like an egg.

“You don’t need to do this,” you blurt out. “You’re so beautiful.”

“So are you. You don’t need to, either.”

The tender way she says it—standing now, face inches from yours—you almost believe her. And you really do wish you were a man. Or she was. Then you’d comfort each other the way that works best: blind, dark, intimate surrender. This kind of shit—affirmation from someone you think is almost certainly hotter than you, and probably knows it, and probably only complimented you to be nice—just doesn’t cut it. Fucking’s the sincerest form of flattery.

Still, you have to try once more to reach her. To reach yourself.

“Let’s make a pact,” you say. “I’ll stop if you’ll stop.”

You see the ghosts of shadows rise under her skin, traces of poison drops that bloomed dark and wide into an incurable sepsis—maybe an uncle’s comment on the shape of her calves; or how her sister’s old prom dress, when she tried it on, was tight on the hips.

“Sure. You got a deal,” she says, on the verge of criling again, extending her lovely arm, her immaculate hand, for you to shake. You can’t look into her eyes. You know what you’ll see—that she knows that you know that girls like you can’t keep such promises.

“See you around,” she says.

“Yeah.”

You turn and stare into the sink until she’s gone.

Afterwards, you push through the crowd and find your roommate, who did you no favors bringing you here—she’s sweet, but lacks subtlety; thinks you haven’t been getting out enough.

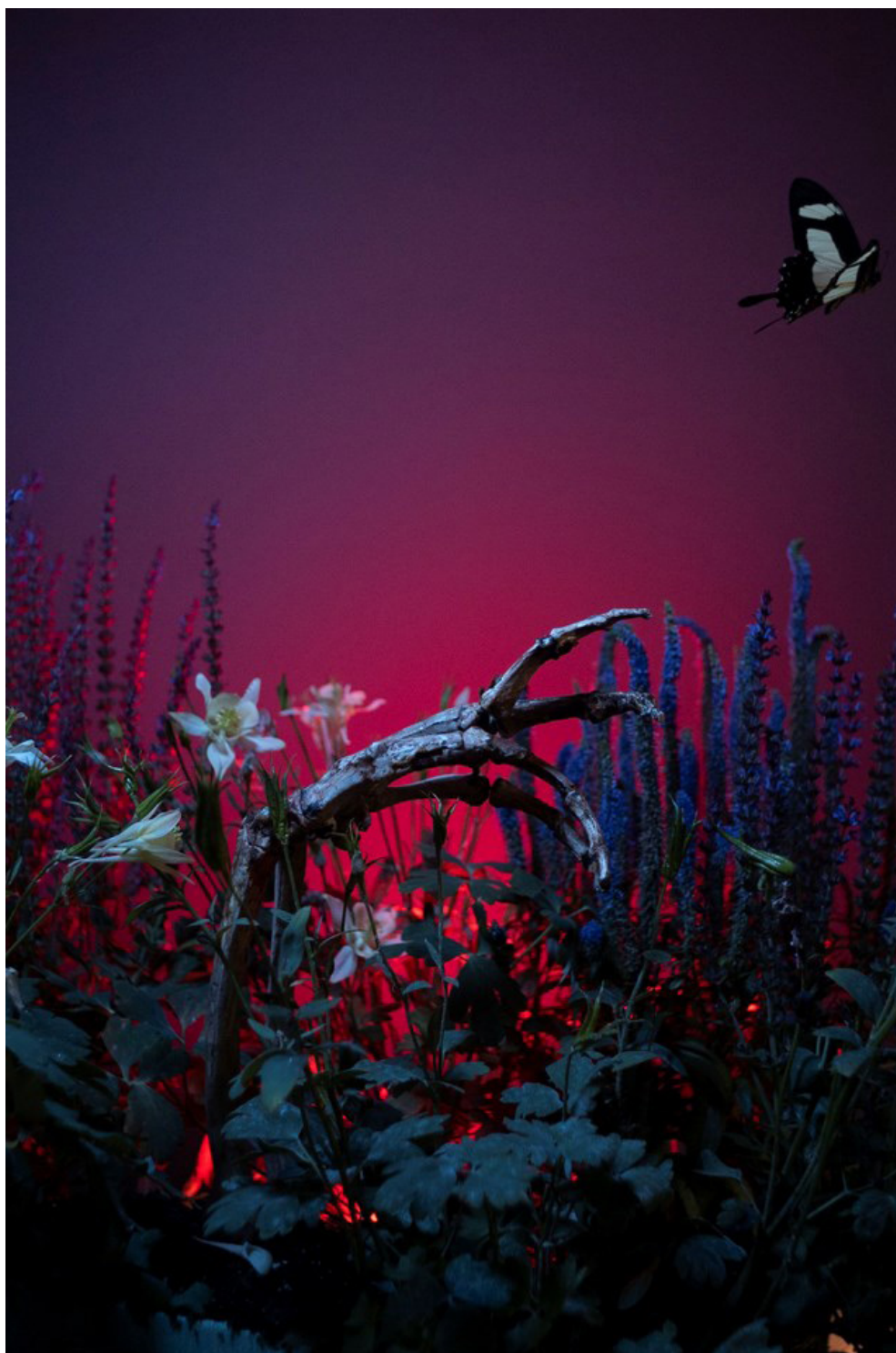
You catch a glimpse of the girl a while later, standing beside a tall, handsome man.

He’s not even looking at her.

He’s talking to two other girls.

# arcadia

erica matthews





# fucking while broken

carina stopenski

bit lip            split lip  
           i have waited for you  
           buck your hips  
 i'm sorry  
 that i can't move mountains for you

i won't tell you        how  
           my body        aches  
 every time you rail my cunt  
           because        we're both having  
                           so        much fun

*asking is this okay*  
           *tell me what you want*  
           *let me            service you*  
 i am dead fish flopping  
 please do all the work

i tell you to pull my hair  
           draw my blood  
           do what you can  
           for me            to forget  
                           how badly it hurts  
                           just to live

*let me take care of you*

i wish you knew  
 what you have gotten yourself into

you say            *keep going*  
           and i'm trying so hard

but my body  
 can't keep up

silicon assistant  
 feeling between fingers  
                           you moan  
                           into my neck  
 and i can feel the scars  
 from your sickness

do they call you resilient too

or do they        expect you to be healed  
                           after they depulped you  
                           turned you from tumor to crater

medically-mandated gentleness

tear open my womb  
           unravel my insides  
           make me hollow

pull us apart    wet    sticky  
                           whose blood is this  
                           can you tell me

can you  
 help me forget  
*is this okay*  
*let me take care of you*

gather all my pieces  
 you're the only one here  
 strong enough

# as long as the skin exists

megan e. o'laughlin

For most adults, the skin weighs about eight pounds, the weight of an average cat. The skin can stretch to cover an area of twenty-two square feet, roughly the size of a small storage closet or a huge dining table. Besides keeping us protected and hydrated, the skin offers a map of our genetics and past injuries. Similarly, our metaphorical skin—our emotional skin—can also hold such histories.

## Epidermis

The Latin prefix *epi* means over or on, and the epidermis is the top layer, protection for the body's deeper layers. Epidermis cells flake off and regenerate every twenty-seven days. Look around a room and see the dust on the tabletop or floating in a sunbeam: this is your epidermis released to the air. The settled dust, which you may wipe away with a wet rag while listening to a podcast, is last month's epidermis. It is last month's *you*.

Deep in the epidermis, the melanocyte cells bring pigmentation to the skin. My skin is light, barely melanated except for the freckles and moles, of which I have many. Some moles have been removed and a few of those biopsied. An inflamed scar runs across my left shoulder from an old surgery to remove one such mole. Once someone asked me if it was a gunshot wound. I laughed, for my skin hasn't experienced such jolting trauma.

But perhaps it has.

## Dermis

Unlike the epidermis, the dermis layer does not regenerate. Any damage will last for as long as the skin exists. Depending on what happens to the body after death, this may be a long time.

A tattoo marks the dermis layer of the skin, perhaps as decoration, a symbol, or even identification. The etymology of tattoo is from the Samoan word *tatau*, meaning 'to strike', the act of striking a needle to place ink into the skin. Tattoos come to life in the skin in many ways: a tattoo gun, a needle, a safety pin and ballpoint ink, or with an ink saturated thread woven through the skin.

Coal miners often suffer from traumatic tattoos—accidental tattoos—when coal dust enters open wounds. Whether invited or not, the external object becomes stuck. Traumatic tattoos don't look like colorful dragons or sultry pinup girls. Pictures online show shapeless shadows like dusty ghosts within the skin.

Trauma can also refer to a physical injury--a blow to the head, a broken bone, a cut to the skin.

Through my years of providing psychotherapy, I've learned trauma means something is stuck. Psychologically, the damage may not be so apparent, although it leaves a shadow, more dusty ghosts beneath the skin.

### **Hypodermis**

The Latin prefix *hypo* means beneath or below. The deepest layer of the skin is protected, and it also protects. The hypodermis connects the skin to the bones and muscles, and covers deeper layers of the body, such as blood vessels and organs.

The hypodermis also stores fat, which I learned from a young age is a terrible enemy. I often heard the women in my family lament what they ate as they judged their bodies. They scowled in the mirror and pulled at their clothing. I imagined a body in rapid transformation after a meal, like Popeye's bulging biceps after a can of spinach, except it was a woman's distended stomach after a piece of cake. Popeye smiled and puffed his chest up, so strong. But the woman slumped over and covered her torso with her arms, embarrassed of what she ate, so ashamed she had a body at all.

### **Extradermis**

The Latin prefix *extra* means outside or beyond. Extradermal refers to the space beyond the layers of the skin. My vision here is dreamy and not scientific. There is no diagram for such a thing, but I know this to exist because it's a part of me. Imagine an invisible net above and outside the skin, where the consciousness floats, and little is felt save for an occasional buzz of light sensation. I found this feeling intentionally by drinking and sometimes unintentionally when my nervous system shorted out and I hovered helplessly over my body.

### **Epidermis**

Despite my barely melanated skin, my epidermis appears colorful in other ways, injected with various ink colors. If the skin can cover a large table, at least a few place settings are covered in various tattoos: a spider web with a garden orb weaver, bright hydrangeas, a meditating cat, an anatomical heart, several lotus flowers, a tree of life, two bluebirds, one large crow, a woman's head, various clouds, and shading of all sorts.

The epidermis heals quickly after a tattoo. It scabs, scales, and itches quite intensely, but within those twenty seven days, it is renewed. There is an illusion here: the skin's surface looks utterly changed, yet the alteration is at a deeper level. The marks may fade, but they will stay for as long as the skin exists.

### **Extradermis**

I was a teen when I got my first tattoo in a bar in Naantali, Finland. At age sixteen, I left my high school in small town Idaho to study in Finland as an exchange student. I squandered that fantastic opportunity by keeping my blood alcohol level as high as I could for the entire year.

I buzzed with excitement, ready for my tattoo. I was drunk, as was my friend Laura, who was also ready for a tattoo. My Finnish friend Kea already had a tattoo from the skinny man behind the bar, both

the bartender and the tattooer. He poured shots as he prepared the tattoo gun.

### Extradermis

In my youth, I did not excel at sports, but I was quite good at drinking. My tastes were specific—no cheap beer, no gin, yes to vodka. Years of drinking taught me that I might be the most dangerous type of drunk. While some slur their words as they clumsily stumble about, I sat upright, engaged in conversation, and walked for hours. Sometimes I woke up with scratches on my skin and didn't know how they got there.

I read that when a person has alcohol blackouts but can eat, walk, and talk, it is not because they are cool, as I once believed, but because the brain is alcohol tolerant.

My brain was alcohol-tolerant at age sixteen.

### Dermis

I wanted an eagle tattoo on my left bicep simply because they were cool. In the mid-90s, bald eagles were endangered in the US, wiped out by the chemical agent DDT, which weakened their eggshells. As a kid, we traveled to the Northwoods of Wisconsin for fishing trips with my dad's family. For hours we sat in green boats and pulled in bass, pike, and trout. The fish too small to keep were cut open by my dad's knife, a long slice through the belly. He flung the fish on the water where it floated on the surface.

We waited for the bald eagle, and this vivid memory lives in my body: the fishy smell, the bright sun, the sound of the eagle's wings, a *whoosh* as it deftly grabbed its food—dead flesh in giant talons. Then, the eagle flew off to take its spoils to its post in the trees.

From the bartender's book of clipped magazine pictures, I selected an eagle with outstretched wings. I pulled the picture out of the book, slid it across the bar, and poked it with my finger. "This one," I said. My friend translated a bit to the bartender. What exactly she said, I didn't know.

### Hypodermis

The summer before I moved to Finland, I became taller, grew breasts, and my hips expanded. None of my clothes fit. My pale skin stretched with the growth, marked with purplish-pink lines. Embarrassed, I refused to wear the short gym shorts in class. My parents yelled, exasperated that my grade was docked to a D because of my refusal to wear my gym uniform. Even on the hottest summer days, I covered my shame with fabric, denying myself comfort.

I felt adolescence's usual sensory roller coaster—icy chills in the skin, vivid fantasies, and an animalistic draw towards certain people. I was interested in sex and felt attracted to both guys and girls, which was confusing. But I knew sex involved the removal of clothes, so I resolved to never do that. I could not do that.

### Dermis

Stretch marks are aptly named. The stretching skin ruptures the connective tissue, leaving marks like a frayed piece of fabric. They can show up during puberty, pregnancy, and any other time of rapid

weight change. Like tattoos or other scars, they occur in the dermis layer, where the cells do not regenerate. They stay on the skin as a small, banded mark. The bright streak indicates that a change happened quickly, and the skin had to adjust. They may fade, but they never heal completely.

### **Hypodermis**

I knew from a young age that the culprit of fat was food, and the better the food, the more likely it would cause fat. I despised food yet loved it. In my frenzied obsession, I hid treats under my bed and hoarded money to buy sweets. I insisted on rifling through my friend's cupboards to find the sweet snacks in plastic bags we rarely kept in our house, which was always stocked with wheat crackers and diet soda.

In the evenings, I sat in the bathtub and listened to the radio. When Salt n Pepa said their song was for sexy people, I knew I was excluded, for I was too fat to be a sexy person. Eight years old, and I already detested my own body. In the scalding bath, my awareness detached from the skin.

### **Dermis**

My friend Laura screamed as the skinny guy inked the outline of a treble clef on her ankle, but my first tattoo barely bothered me. The needle pokes infiltrated my body's near-constant numbness. Endorphins rushed through my brain and mixed with the alcohol. I giggled.

The tattoo guy wiped my arm, bright red spots on the washcloth. Then, he called it in his thick Finnish accent: "too much blood." Now I know that alcohol and tattoos don't mix because alcohol thins the blood and causes excess bleeding. Any decent tattoo shop won't allow an intoxicated person to get tattooed. Still, it was done. My first tattoo.

Enough ink remained to make out a fist-sized bird with sloppy wings and the head of a chicken, hackle feathers pointing downwards. Instead of a majestic eagle, I had a sad little fowl. Embarrassed, I called it The Fucking Rooster. Once, in a fit of self-disgust, I tried to rub it off with an eraser, but I could not rub enough to remove the ink. Perhaps I could cover it up, but it would never go away.

### **Extradermis**

My arm bore The Fucking Rooster when I had sex for the first time, a drunken incident which started and ended in a small hotel room. First, a group of us convened with bottles and loud laughter. But it ended with only me, on a quiet tiptoe to the bathroom, where I found a bright spot of blood on my underwear. This was the inverse of the wedding night sheet stained with blood, for this stain didn't reveal good news about virginity. It told only some of my secrets: I'd never had sex, sex scared me, and I had no language with which to speak about sex or my body.

I left that hotel room with an icy sense of the skin and nausea in my gut. I could barely recall what happened. I continued to drink but in a sad, messy way. My friend Ben noticed tears in my eyes one night as we drank beers around a table. Worried, he pulled me aside, and I cried for a long time, saying little. His shirt was soaked with my snot and tears, but he didn't seem to mind. I was so grateful for that.

### Hypodermis/Extradermis

I was well indoctrinated into the rules of dieting. I skipped meals but eventually became too hungry or drunk to continue my fast. But that summer after the hotel room, I released all the rigid rules. I devoured meatballs defrosted quickly in the microwave. At the local Hesburger, I dipped hot fries in the tangy cups of *punainen majoneesi*, or red mayonnaise. I savored pineapple ice cream with sweet licorice swirls. None of my pants fit except for the baggy black pair with an elastic waist.

My extra layers of fat helped me so I wouldn't find myself drunk on a bed, hovering above my own body. Later, I discovered the definition of consent and realized I did not ever give it, did not even know how to give it. A drunk girl, disconnected from her own skin, does not speak the language of consent, only the language of drinking up and checking out.

My memory is a house full of rooms, many of them empty, while others hold a few plain objects: bottles, t-shirts, and that stained underwear. I walk the halls of memory, confused. The days after the hotel room, I followed that young man around. He was tall, skinny, and spoke multiple languages. He was usually drunk, too, and I was a ghostly, drunken girl. Once I was fun, when I took shots and yelled, but when I emerged that morning with my blood-stained underwear, I became quite unstable. I feared that boy yet wanted his approval. I expected that sex meant that we bonded in some way I didn't understand. I felt pathetic.

It's tempting to blame someone, but I don't blame him, for he could have been anyone. I had little regard for my own safety because I couldn't even feel my body that would need to be saved. I navigated my surroundings with a broken compass, in a world that doesn't treat drunken girls with much kindness. Drunk girls are assaulted all the time. Sometimes they end up with bad tattoos as well.

### Dermis/Extradermis

In her book *Could this be Magic? Tattooing as Liberation Work*, author Tamara Santibañez shares what many have experienced: the ritual of tattoos can offer empowerment, particularly for those who experienced body trauma. Within the deliberate selection of meaningful symbols and care from a supportive artist, one can experience body autonomy and even healing.

But, as everything has its shadow, tattooing can also be harmful. Santibañez notes that "we do not tattoo in a void," but in a world affected by systems of oppression and dominance. In recent years, many tattoo artists, some quite famous, have been reported for harassment, and even assault, of their tattoo clients. Recognizing the realities of coercive abuse, Santibañez offers thoughtful instruction for tattoo artists on trauma awareness through frequent consent and collaboration. There is a movement to ensure tattoo artists are just as trauma aware as anyone else who interacts with a person's painful history: therapists, doctors, yoga instructors, massage therapists, and so on. After all, if trauma lives in the body, a tattoo artist literally sticks a sharp needle into the ghosts of the person's past.

### Dermis

Just a few months before leaving Finland, I went to an actual tattoo studio to cover the Fucking Rooster. I picked a design from the flash books, a large bird to cover the little bird. I understood that it was an "American Northwest design." It reminded me of the childhood fishing trips and my Northwest



home, where my family moved when I was eleven years old.

Later, I learned that the design was not an eagle but a Native Tlingit thunderbird, a fierce mythological creature that brings the lightning and thunder. I am not Native American; my people were Irish, British, and Scandinavian. We were farmers and later, we were settlers and colonizers. They called us homesteaders when my grandmother's family bought Sioux land for pennies on the dollar. The Fucking Rooster was a better fit for me, after all.

Eventually, I covered the thunderbird with a tattoo of a large anatomical heart. Even now, pieces of the thunderbird are visible underneath. If I look hard enough under the heart on my sleeve, I can see the faint lines of the Fucking Rooster under the layers of ink—very faded, but still there.

I never got that badass eagle I wanted.

### **Dermis/Extradermis**

In my various jobs, I've been exposed to many bodily maladies. I've cleaned blood and vomit, called the paramedics, and seen many scars. Working as a therapist, I've helped with many issues: eating disorders, panic attacks, arachnophobia, bipolar, PTSD. For years, I specialized in helping people who cut themselves, some considered to have a diagnosis called borderline personality disorder, a painful and heavily stigmatized condition increasingly believed to be related to complex trauma.

I taught my clients to cope when they felt like cutting. They slowed their breathing, placed ice packs on their face, walked the neighborhood, and sometimes we talked on the phone as they did so. Although they told me the cuts made life more bearable, I encouraged them to feel both within and beyond the skin. To hurt oneself is violent, and we can't live meaningful, loving lives when we treat ourselves with hatred.

Dr. Marsha Linehan, the creator of dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), the therapy I once specialized in, wrote "borderline individuals are the psychological equivalent of third-degree burn patients. They simply have, so to speak, no emotional skin. Even the slightest touch or movement can create immense suffering." A third-degree burn destroys not just the outer layer of the epidermis, but all the layers of the skin. These burns often require intense intervention like hospitalization and skin grafts. We already know that this kind of damage won't ever go away, not as long as the skin exists. Without intervention, such burns can be deadly.

### **Dermis**

The middle layer of the skin—the dermis—holds the tattoo. The small tattoo needle enters the skin about one hundred times per second, depositing the ink.

I watch my tattoo artist, Krysten, carefully wipe down her workstation and place a tiny vial of black ink on the worktable. She works meticulously, with precision, just as you'd want when someone creates something you'll live with forever. Krysten is kind, talented, and for years, she helped me cover up old tattoos with no judgments about how the ink came to be on my body.

"Ready?" she says, and I nod. The stencil is on my shin, but soon the design will exist permanently, black ink in the dermis. She starts at the top of the shape, needle in the leg. At first it burns, my heart races, and my stomach churns. But soon, the endorphins kick in and my ears adjust to the high-pitched squeal of the tattoo gun. A few hours later, we are done, and she wipes the skin clean.

I slept early that night, my leg carefully wrapped, sober like I always am, and have been for years. In the morning I run the shower water extra hot to wash off the excess ink. I see the face there- serene expression and hair, a tangle of snakes. I have a Medusa head on my shin. For the next few days, I wash Medusa's face with soap. I wear baggy pants so she has room to breathe. My skin becomes itchy and scabby, but I leave it alone, except for the careful application of ointment several times a day. This process of healing is one of my favorite parts of a new tattoo piece. As I care for myself, my skin heals and regenerates in only a few weeks. My skin is transformed.

### **Dermis/Extradermis**

I know what it is like to feel your body is not your own. I could have cut myself every day, but I chose the oblivion of substances and food instead. My protection was my absence. I drifted away from my body, unfeeling and unconscious, distant from both the unpleasant and the pleasant. Like my clients who cut themselves, I simply did not know how else to cope. And like my clients who learned to soothe themselves, I eventually learned to truly live in my skin.

### **My Skin/Our Skin**

My epidermis has regenerated over three hundred times since the morning of the blood-spotted underwear in the hotel room. In these years, I have sloughed off old skin, regenerated old cells, gained wrinkles and gray hair, and my skin has both expanded and contracted. I even grew an entire human, with her own cells, in my own body.

Women with tattoos have long been considered slutty and even unstable. My first tattoo experiences, with the Fucking Rooster and the Thunderbird, certainly reinforce the problems of careless impulsivity mixed with the permanent rite of tattooing. But perhaps we tattooed ones are also courageous, for we celebrate and honor our bodies after a lifetime of floating above the skin's surface.

You are probably familiar with the story of Medusa, the snake haired Gorgon whose piercing eyes turn men into stone. She was decapitated by Perseus, who famously carried her head and used it as a weapon. In one account of Medusa's origin, a god raped Medusa in Athena's temple. In her fury for the desecration of her sacred space, the Goddess Athena cursed Medusa with snakes for hair. Although she became monstrous, she also became dangerous, so she could never be so violated again. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Medusa is described: "Now, to terrify her enemies, numbing them with fear, the goddess wears the snakes, that she created, as a breastplate."

Today I see Medusa on my leg, viewed through the epidermis window. She is the newest addition to my dermal ink, a symbol of a breastplate: a symbol of protection. Underneath my skin, there are all the makings of a healthy body, for which I am now so thankful: muscle, bone, organs, and fat.

Medusa can offer protection, and maybe we can aspire to be like her: she protects us as we protect others. She is a reminder of harm, but also a remedy. She inspires me, as a therapist and mother, as I arm myself and others with fierce awareness and self-compassion. I also realize that we are all a bit like the warrior Perseus, running scared through life's many dangers. To be a protector, and to be protected,

# two-tongued bodies

jasmine kaur

it's a quiet day and we sit on the grass,  
the sun's presence muted by the clouds.  
her hair is long,  
and that's important.  
mine's too,  
and that's important too.  
i'm wearing white, rare for me,  
but pleasant against the green grass.

we haven't been talking long when she plucks  
a question out of the cool air.  
asks me what my body would say, if it could speak.  
a bolt of anger rushes through me,  
but already starting to fade.  
in a few minutes it will be almost completely gone  
like all my other sudden rages.  
this too is important.

i want to ask her why  
she thinks my body doesn't already speak to me  
every  
second  
of  
every  
day.

what else do we call 'body language'?  
i want to tell her that i have a two-tongued body,  
so to speak,  
a tongue for other bodies.  
and a tongue just for me.

my body talks to me,  
from my skin to my bones.

my body aches sometimes  
because i go too fast, sometimes  
because i am stuck in the same  
space for several songs.  
usually i can tell the difference between the aches.

my legs stutter while walking  
asking me to pause.  
my feet tap the floor  
alerting me to building nervousness.  
my eyes close  
dissolving the world around me.  
sometimes my hands help my ears do the same.

i want to tell her that i am still learning  
to be a better translator of my own body.  
because i was mis-taught to mis-read so much.  
that there's a difference between  
muteness and a foreign tongue.  
that my body isn't foreign to me,  
but was made foreign to me,  
by powers still hard to see.

but i do not have the energy to say all this.  
not now. not with the anger already gone.  
so before this goes any further,  
i answer her with a kiss.

# face day

susan ito

The night before I start medical school, my mother, in her mama-san apron and mom jeans, squeezes my arm and smiles. “You ready for gakko? First day of class!”

I’m twenty-three, and my mother makes me feel like I’m five, heading off to kindergarten. She’s made me a lunch: three onigiri wrapped in tin foil, a package of chocolate cupcakes, and an orange. The same thing in a metal box for Dad. I ride with him on his NJ Transit bus over the bridge, then take two trains up to the Bronx. He drives the same route he’s had for decades. I bet I’m the only one in my class still living with my parents, commuting from Jersey to school. Most of the other students live in the hospital complex, but I’ve pared down the expenses to the barest minimum: no rent, no cafeteria meal card. Nothing but tuition and books.

I bend down to kiss her forehead. She’s only four-ten, and I stoop to reach her. “Later, Mom.”

She blinks from the front step. “You pay attention to the sensei. Be good.” I guess that means: get good grades.

My sensei for anatomy class is Dr. Alexander. He wears a paisley surgical bandana over his wild gray curls and chews on toothpicks from his lab coat pocket. I open my fresh notebook.

Dr. Alexander tells us that we will start with the bones. I had worried that they’d be scraped of flesh, boiled, dried out and hollow like Thanksgiving wishbones. But no, they are molded from heavy, ivory-colored plastic, and are pleasant to handle, like chunky puzzle pieces. Dr. Alexander hands out a typed list, so we can identify and check off the two-hundred odd pieces, the humerus hinged onto the radius, the thick discs of vertebrae stacked one upon the other.

Our task is to name each one, and put it in its place, from the hefty pelvis down to the tiny jewels of the inner ear, the cochlea like miniature seashells. My sort-of boyfriend and classmate, David, cradles the pebbles of hand bones in his palm. “Look, the hamate really does look like a ham.” We lay them out on the floor, next to our spread-open volumes of *Grant’s Atlas of Human Anatomy* and create whole people-sized skeletons. Alexander comes around with his clipboard to check us off. If we’ve got it right, we scoop the bones back into their boxes, and move on.

I don’t want to move on. I know it is going to get worse. I have been doing pretty well until now. Physics, organic chemistry, cell biology, all the dry sciences have been easy. It is the wet human science we are entering now, that frightens me. First dead people, then living ones, with pain and disease, looking to me for answers.

After identifying the bones, we are each assigned a yellow rubber apron, the strings damp and foul smelling. On the other side of the swinging metal doors is the cadaver lab. I have peeked through the windows of wire-crossed glass already, seen the long steel tables with the little troughs around the edges, the bodies covered in rubber sheets. I can smell that room even with the doors locked shut, a burning green smell that sets the back of my throat twitching. We enter tomorrow.

Dinner is gohan and string beans and eggs. I slouch over my plate and scowl like a teenager. My father doesn't say a word—just shovels it down, slaps his transit hat over his head, and walks out. He's signed on for the night route this week.

My mother tries to make conversation. "Nori-chan, did you see David at gakko?"

Of course I did. He's the only one, besides me, from our class at City, who got into Albert Einstein. We've been clinging together ever since we got there, like two kids lost in the woods, Hansel and Gretel. "Yeah," I grunt. "Yeah, I saw him."

I don't tell them that after we finished the bone class, we went up to his studio apartment at the hospital complex, and we fucked for an hour. I don't tell them, nor did I mention to him, that I didn't come.

My parents think David is a dream. It's their dream that we both graduate medical school, that we open a His-N-Her family practice somewhere, and have a bunch of cute little hapa kids. It's not a bad dream. It has its own seduction. There's something beautiful and easy about it, a greased lane into success and happiness. But I don't know if it's my dream.

In the morning, we put on our stinky aprons. Alexander passes out dissection kits: the scalpel with its packet of tiny blades, the long metal probes, scissors, the fine ridged clamps. In the women's room, I test the scalpel for sharpness, pressing it into the thick skin of my thumb. I'm shocked to see the crescent of blood, how it wells up so quickly. The red trickles down and forks along my wrist before I can wash it under the faucet. I am fascinated that it disappears when I wash it away, only to pulse up again instantly. When it starts to throb, I wrap it in a brown paper towel and press it down, hard, until the wound stays clean. I think about the next morning, when we will make our first slice into human flesh, with no answering flow of blood.

They are waiting there for us, eight quiet mounds. Name cards are taped at the head of each table, like at a dinner party. We have been assigned to alphabetical groups and so I take my place—Fujii—along with Friedman, Gutierrez and Hooper. Ann Hooper has the highest grade-point average in our class. She says it is because she prays to Jesus, and He in His goodness and wisdom plants the knowledge in her brain.

Ann kneels down at the side of our table, like a child at the edge of a bed. She squeezes her eyes shut and puts her hands together. "Thank you, Lord, for this blessed person's generosity, in donating their body to our education—"

"It wasn't generosity," Alexander snaps.

All heads turn to look at him. Ann doesn't open her eyes.

"These individuals who lie before you, ladies and gentlemen," Alexander intones, his fingers held before him like a tent, "are not philanthropists nor intellectuals. They did not arrive here with your medi-

cal education in mind. Their presence here is their tragedy, but your gift.”

Ann has struggled to her feet. She grips the table with nail bitten fingers.

“These cadavers, my friends—” Alexander grins with a denture smile, “—are courtesy of the New York City Morgue. They are bodies with no claim tickets, the unknown and unwanted. Society’s discards.” I’m horrified.

Henry Gutierrez whistles through his teeth. His gelled hair stands up in black, trembly spikes. “Homeless people? Jesus.”

Alexander strolls through the room, patting the rubber blankets with an odd affection. “Ninety days, free rent, in the morgue,” he continues. “And if they’re unclaimed in that time...” He spread his arms out in a grand gesture. “They’re ours.”

The room is quiet as space, all the oxygen sucked away.

Alexander claps his palms together jovially. “All right now. Get out your *Grant’s Atlas*. Put it up on your bookstand and find the section on the axilla. Also known as the armpit.”

I feel sick. I look across the room at David, who has his dissection kit unpacked neatly on the metal tray next to his mound of very large cadaver. He winks and flashes me a thumbs-up. I press my lips together in some semblance of a weak smile.

Alexander’s voice cuts through the nervous chatter and rattling of tools. “All right, people. Fold up the plastic covering, neatly, and place it on the shelf below.” Henry G and I fold up the sheet, meeting with our toes touching, like a married couple doing laundry.

The body stretched out before us is wrapped like a mummy in layers of thick, reeking gauze, from head to toe. Alexander warns us not to let the cadavers dry out; final grades will be decreased by half a point if he discovers a body that isn’t properly wrapped and covered.

“The lab is open twenty-four hours a day,” he says, “and I encourage you to take full advantage of this liberal schedule. There is much to explore here, ladies and gentlemen.”

And then we start. We snap on our latex gloves and unpeel the gauze from his upper arms and shoulders. Henry and I gasp. Our man is minus one hand. “Ay, we’ve got a part missing.” The class laughs and Alexander nods.

“Congratulations, Gutierrez. That’s one-armed Oscar. You’ll have to double up when it comes time for the hands. He still has his armpit though, doesn’t he? The beautiful and mysterious axilla.”

Oscar’s underarm hair is sparse and tangled and I wonder if he used deodorant. If he had bathed by splashing cold water out of a sink at Grand Central. His skin is smooth as vinyl, a dusty beige gray.

Henry G hands me the scalpel, handle first. “You go, Fujii.”

I shake my head. “It’s okay. Go ahead.”

Dr. Alexander has drawn a large X on the blackboard, the shape of our first incision. “Once you’ve loosened up the skin,” he says, “fold back the four corners with flaps, like opening a box.”

Henry positions his two index fingers a hands’ breath apart and nods at me. “Here to here.” I glanced over at Ann and Friedman. They have already cut, lifted and separated, and are poking at a vein, shot through with blue dye.

I saw back and forth gingerly, barely breaking through the skin. Henry clicks his tongue. “Harder.”

I let the scalpel clatter onto the steel table. “You do it then.”

We stop speaking. Henry picks up the instrument and works as if he were alone, muttering, while I stand behind him like a shadow. He makes a perfect cross through the skin.



I lean over Henry's shoulder and watch the textbook pictures swell into three dimensions: there are the delicate white cutaneous nerves on the underside of the skin. When the metal probe touches the nerve, I jump. I am not strong enough for this. There is a creature, bristly with fear, slowly inching up my esophagus. Its long claws poke at the back of my throat. I try to swallow it down but my mouth is dry. It inches up and up. I focus on a point somewhere above one-armed Oscar's elbow. There is a blurred, purplish blue tattoo. An eagle, ready to pounce.

Henry locates the first dozen items on the list, and I stand behind him and check them off on the paper. *Brachial nerve*. By lunchtime I am dizzy and hollow, reeling from the fog of preservatives. The doors open and we pour out, blinking in the sunlight, taking in great gulps of fresh air.

I haven't gotten used to it, the way Alexander said we would. It hasn't gotten better. I hate coming into the lab at night, flipping up the switch, seeing those picked apart bodies in a flash of brightness. It's a quick view of hell.

We finish the axilla, and then work our way down the arms. Since Oscar is missing his, from the elbow down, all four of us crowd around his left side. Every Friday, we have a quiz, which I either pass by a margin of one or two points, or I don't pass at all.

My parents ask me how it's going over a dinner of teriyaki hotdogs. I shrug. I can't admit I'm on the verge of failing.

"Dai jobu, Nori-chan," my mother says. But I'm not sure it really will be okay.

Every class, we see a little bit more of Oscar: his back, with some grayish moles, the flat stiff planes of his buttocks. The more we reveal, peeling away the stinking gauze, the more I want to know who he was. I ask Alexander. "Are you sure we can't know who they are? Who they used to be?"

He chews on his toothpick until it frays. "Forget it, Fujii. Concentrate on the exam tomorrow. You're one that can't afford to be asking stupid questions. The real question is this." He picks up a thick blue vein. "What's this called?"

I chew my lip. "Portal vein? Hepatic?"

He turns away in disgust. "You don't know." He talks to the open door. "That had better change soon, Fujii, or you're not going to be here come spring."

His words, the threat of them, bring a strange thrill to my thorax. The thought of not being here in the spring is both nauseating and exciting. My parents would be devastated. My father working extra shifts to pay my tuition. My mother's dream of her physician daughter.

I peer into the department office. The secretary's desk is decorated with fake spiderwebs, baby pumpkins, and a bowl of miniature candy bars. Her skin is sprayed a silvery green color and I can't help but think of the cadavers.

I get right to the point. "Do you have any information on the identities of the ... the donor bodies?"

"Why would you want to know a thing like that," she says, and smiles. Two of her teeth are like little fangs.

I call the police department's non-emergency line. "Have there been any missing persons reported recently?"

The man on the other end barks a laugh. "Yeah, hundreds."

"This was a man with one arm. An eagle tattoo."

"How old?"

"Sixties, I think. That's my guess." My heart is hammering underneath my shirt.

"Any other identifying marks?"

"I don't know. He hasn't been fully unwrapped yet."

The man barks again and says they can't help me.

People can get lost. They can hide. I wanted to hide. I was the one slinking around the back of the high school. I was underneath the bleachers, sucking on the nubs of joints, my hand under Vivi Hernandez' shirt.

My mother was volunteering at the concession stand that night. She was dragging a trash bag to the dumpster when she saw us, the maroon smear of Vivi's lipstick on my cheek. The look of horror on her face, her mouth a round O of shock. Later, at home, her palm smacked the back of my skull, the only time she ever hit me. Don't do that, she said. She couldn't name what it was. Just that it was bad.

I decided I could change. I could live the proud existence for my parents. I'd made out with boys too, before, in middle school. I figured I was bi. I could go back to that. It would make them happy. I found David, and pulled straight A's in the premed program at City. It seemed to be working.

One night, Dad and I walk from the bus terminal, over the concrete overpass to the George Washington Bridge. The sidewalk trembles from the traffic below, a sea of vehicles nosing their way across the river. He walks a little crooked these days. "One of these days, you gonna fix my ashii, ne?"

"I don't know, Dad. I'm not sure I'm going into orthopedics."

"What kind of medicine, then?" The edges of his eyes wrinkle and I know he likes saying it, imagining me in the white coat, any white coat.

"I dunno. Pathology, maybe. Microscopes, viruses. It's ... neater." I hadn't actually considered it until this moment, but the moment I say it, it is a relief. There are other options, radiology, pathology, things that didn't involve the slime of human bodies.

He doesn't seem disappointed, just nods, considering it. "Ah." Just as we round the corner of our street, he stops and jingles some coins in his pocket. "Mommy and me, we're proud of your hard work, Nori-chan." His eyes are glistening. "Jozu-neh."

I want to say, *it's too hard for me*.

"Dai jobu," he says. I don't know if he means it's going to turn out okay, or if it's okay if I fail.

I take a long swallow and look back at the highway, the rumble and honk of traffic. "Thanks, Dad."

At home, my mother has locked herself in the bathroom. We can hear the sound of water splashing through the door. A long, noisy bath.

When we finish with the upper arms, the legs and the back, we slice them open, throat to groin, and look at all the treasures inside—lungs, heart, stomach. We unwind the astonishing long intestines. Poke around at all the giant-sized giblets. Then we roll the cadavers over and do their backs and down the legs to the feet. I talk to Oscar as I pull the fascia from between his toes. *Do you have children, old guy? Children who turned away from you? Did you refuse to accept who they were?*

The bottoms of Oscar's feet are covered in one big callous, layers and layers of pavement-toughened skin. He probably didn't wear shoes for years. I'm shaking. I imagine faceless, armless, shoeless Oscar, pushing his shopping cart with one hand, toward an anonymous death.

David follows me around after class, his green eyes pleading. He doesn't want to tell me he's been acing all the exams, but I know. We go up to his apartment and have terrible, awkward sex, colliding knees, an elbow in the throat. *Whoops. Ow. Sorry.* He asks me to stay the night, and I say okay. All night, we can't get comfortable. It's impossible to sleep. We sigh and groan, moving back to back, back to front, until finally, around three in the morning, I fall into a restless dream. The smell of formaldehyde has permeated my sleep. I dream that I've got my arms around a corpse. It is a man with his skin peeled away, stippled all over with tiny pins. His face is wrapped in dripping yellow gauze. I wake up screaming and screaming in David's ear, pushing away from him, backing into the wall.

He leaps out of bed in one motion, his eyes huge. "What IS it?" he shouts. "What! What!"

I can't do anything but sob and twist the bedsheet.

I get dressed and walk away from his apartment complex, the three slim towers packed with students leaning over books, memorizing all the diseases, the terrible things that can happen to a person. There is a thin layer of snow on the ground, liquefying and turning into gray, crystallized puddles. I splash through them, kicking bits of gravel over the sidewalk, as I pass small row houses with single gables, houses like a child's drawing, with a door in the center and a square window on each side. I pass the Italian bakery and the locksmith shop, my hands jammed into my pockets. I walk down Pelham Parkway to the subway entrance. Take the A to the 14 to the Bridge. Climb onto a bus that looks just like my father's and sway across the bridge to home.

The midterm exam starts at eight in the morning. We line up, clutching our clipboards. There are the bodies, naked and exposed. There are dozens of little pins stuck into them, like the kind that you use to impale butterflies. Each pin with a tiny number taped to it, a miniature flag. We write a hundred numbers on our papers.

We look at the pins. Each pierced thing has a name. What is the name of this limp white cord, this blue tube? The blue is a hint. It is a vein. But is it the cephalic vein, the hepatic vein, the mesenteric vein? I don't know. My brain has turned to mist, and I just write stupidly, \_\_\_\_ VEIN? I hand my clipboard to Alexander, who glances at the paper and sucks air through his teeth.

I scrub my hands in hot water, let the industrial soap foam up to my elbows. Then I take the train up to

the bridge terminal. I sit on a concrete bench where the buses come and go from Jersey, and wait until I see the 15A.

I climb on and sit behind the driver's seat. Even though we're not supposed to talk to or touch the driver, I rub my father's shoulders through his uniform. He grunts and swings the wheel around. "Old man falling apart."

I don't say anything. I just squeeze his neck and watch the road over his shoulder, the same faded line he's been following since I was little.

He stops the bus at the corner of Linwood. Our house is three blocks up the street. I stand up and turn to him for a second before I step down to the sidewalk. I want to say, *Dad, I'm dropping out. I can't do it.* But the words are stuck like gauze to the inside of my throat, and I can't pry them out.

"See you later," he says, followed by a big sigh. Or is it the sound of the bus, sighing exhaust as it drives away?

Face Day is the day that the cadaver's heads are unwrapped. When you can't deny that they're human. Alexander warns us that we might find them with frozen howls on their faces, of the still-opened, milky eyes. It's a decades-old ritual that the first-years spend lunchtime at Clancy's pub, two blocks from the hospital. Then they reel into the laboratory, and the formaldehyde fog is laced with beer and scotch. The gauze is pulled away from the faces with fumbling hands, and then the nightmares can be blamed on the alcohol.

I stand near the bar, order a beer and sip it slowly, letting the bitterness take the edge off my anxiety. We drink, and then lurch into the anatomy lab. Henry G's carefully gelled hair looks as if it's been through a blender. His glasses tilt on his face.

Dr. Alexander doesn't mind students drinking before lab. In fact, he welcomes it in an amused, sadistic kind of way. It's tradition. He has his own plaid thermos, and he lifts the little plastic cup in a toast to the madness.

David leans on the table, reaching out to steady himself, one hand at a time. He doesn't look at me. Ann has her fingers on his arm.

The room is suddenly way too quiet. The sound of my rubber gloves snapping onto my wrists echoes from wall to wall. I look directly at Dr. Alexander, who squints in my direction.

"Let's do it," I say.

"Well, by all means," he responds, waving his cup.

I untuck the tail end of Oscar's gauze where it has been fastened near his neck. I cradle the dense weight of his head in my left palm and unwrap with the other, gathering the length of soft wet cloth into a ball.

The others are all watching me, swaying on their unsteady feet. Waiting for Oscar's face.

The first visible thing is his chin, the small field of fine white stubble. Then, narrow wrinkled lips, opened slightly over a set of bad teeth. It isn't a smile, it isn't a frown; it is the ready position of a person about to say something.

I continue up past the cheeks, the surprising chiseled nose, its clean slope, the shallow craters above the jawline. His eyes are closed. There is a birthmark, a small perfect kidney bean, at the crest of

his eyebrow.

“Hello, Oscar,” I say. “How good to finally meet.”

Slowly, gradually, the bandages fall away from the remaining seven bodies. They are completely naked now.

I lean over Oscar. Our faces are very close. Using the smallest tweezers, I tease apart the muscles around his eyebrows, his forehead. He wears a slight expression of worry. Dai jobu, I whisper, the way my parents say to me. It’s okay. I clean the fibers near his mouth, the ones that gave him language and chewing. For the first time, their names come easily to me. *Orbicularis oculi. Zygomaticus minor.*



# spaldeen

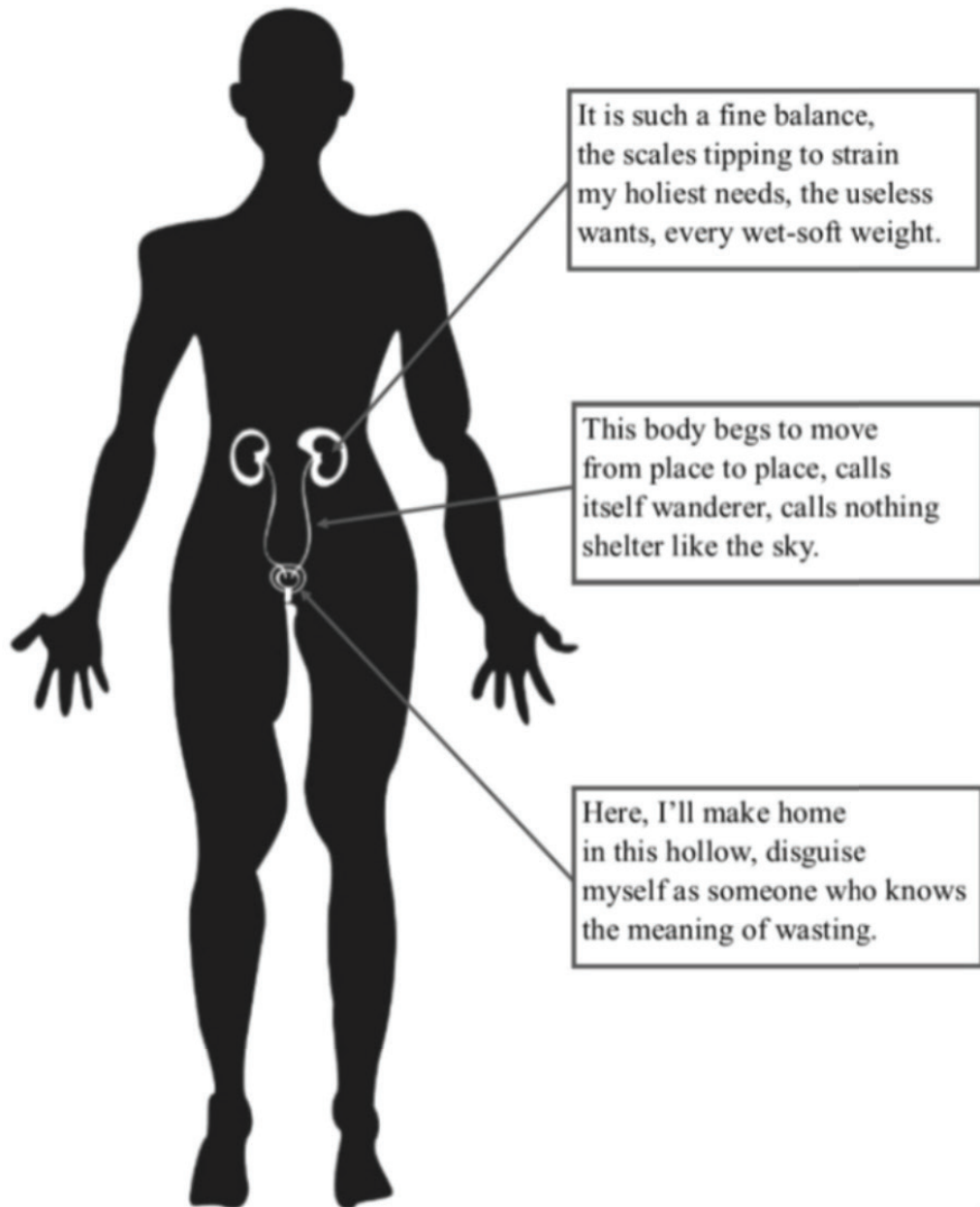
ann calandro





# the renal system

randi clemens



# whatever happens, this is.

## (on Egon Schiele)

carlo rey lacsamana

Despite the lamentable shortness of his life, the Austrian artist, Egon Schiele (1890-1918) achieved a strikingly personal style which had been falsely described as pornographic during his time. It cost him a brief stay in prison on the charge of “immorality.” If the state is left to manage art—art will be denied all its creative possibilities and reduced into a dogmatized, politicized craft. Art and pornography are subjects too problematic for the state. It cannot distinguish which is which so it judges by the terms it only knows: force and cunning. But today nobody complains about the ubiquitous advertisements more degrading, more psychologically pernicious, more pornographic in essence that assault our senses every day. Because our present culture has recklessly mingled advertisement with art. The line that divides these two different fields has almost vanished. Schiele wrote in his prison journal:



“At the hearing, one of my confiscated drawings, the one that had hung in my bedroom, was solemnly burned over a candle flame by the judge in his robes! Auto-da-fé! Savonarola! Inquisition! Middle Ages! Castration, hypocrisy! Go then to the museums and cut up the greatest works of art into little pieces. He who denies sex is a filthy person who smears in the lowest way his own parents who have begotten him.”

But never let the state get in the way of art. In prison, Schiele produced several striking watercolors depicting the experience of being locked in a cell. And that’s how he paints: like someone locked in a cell! Is not the human body a sort of prison? A prison of blood, flesh and bones in which we’re all condemned to live for the rest of our life. In front of one of his works one becomes conscious of the sentient body. How the body feels, how it succumbs to all sorts of sensations, pain, bliss, sex, desire, terror... To look at

it as a pornographic image is to undervalue not only Schiele’s profound imagination but also the depth of the humanly sensibilities which distinguishes his art.

The controversy regarding the alleged pornography of his art is referred to the artist’s choice of models, their provocative appearance, their “pornographic” postures. Young girls and couples posed, bare before

the artist's and spectator's eyes. Schiele believed in the beauty of the human body, physical beauty, but didn't idealize it. He was scrupulously attentive to the feelings of the body, its sexual needs and satisfactions. And he saw pain as the center of it all. Schiele projects how pain and beauty coexist side by side, how they welcome each other in the human body. To perceive beauty is to affirm our awareness of suffering. The experience of beauty is also the recognition of the existence of pain. Schiele has placed this perspective in the human body.

He saw in the physicality of love-making the vulnerability of the human body. The acute sensitivity of the human body to pleasure, and to pain which the body involuntarily submits. This intimate acquaintance with pain finds voice in a poem by the feminist poet Adrienne Rich:

"I put my hand on your thigh  
to comfort both of us, your hand came over mine,  
we stayed that way, suffering together  
in our bodies, as if all suffering  
were physical..."

*As if all suffering were physical.* This corporeal awareness is the core of Schiele's art.

Pornography eradicates the body's susceptibility to pain through false representation of pleasure. It turns bodies into cold, distant, austere love-objects decorated with violence, disengaged from love, and ornamented with false love. Its presentation directly appeals to the base pleasure of uncomprehending and consuming mind. Pornography is oblivious to the pain of the body. It is the undoing of respect for the body and the person. Thus, the exact opposite of Schiele's art. To miss this fundamental distinction is a failure of seeing.

Art historians often refer to Freud's interpretation of unfulfilled sexuality. This psycho-analytical reference is facile and explains only partially the actual experience of sex which Schiele has attempted to go beyond in his art.



Most characters erotically play: teasing, exposing, open to a kind of violence. But it is this openness that challenges the viewer with a sympathetic human contact. This openness is not unfulfilled. It is the unreserved space of contact where the erotic and the intimate meet. Schiele's images come together and struggle to come to terms with their sexual needs and identities.

Sex satisfies a need, a hunger; it serves as a release of the animal impulse yet it also tries to reach the core of the body's essence: the vulnerability, the incompleteness which is transcended in the nature of making love, by a couple in love.

Love-making is the gradual accommodation of two bodies to each other, their needs, their longings, their desires and fears being shared. Through and by love does sex cease to be entirely physical and becomes immaterial: like a form of understanding, like a secret shared in a whisper, like solitude. Thus the expression “make-love” is just a more romantic word for *sharing*. The dark side of love-making is when a calculated act of one’s will is imposed over the other: the violence.

The traditional nude in Western art epitomizes this violence. The nude as a mere *objet du désir* is meant to arouse and affirm the (male) spectator’s sexuality. Today, this traditional reception of the nude as a feeder of appetite is perpetuated by the power of the modern techniques of advertising. The human body unloved is processed as an object to be possessed, surveyed, bought.



Schiele’s unique style—the use of agitated lines, the deformed bodies with their angular sharpness and the strict use of limited shades—confronts the dogmatic representation of the nude. While the latter is depicted as ornamentation like a furniture in one’s home, Schiele liberates the nude by depicting the human body as a compressed space of interacting tensions of life: personal, political, historical all merging. No longer is the spectator flattered by the nude as in the traditional form, Schiele’s is a mirror of a state of mind.

Often Schiele’s figures are punctuated with a sharpness similar to fear. Like the fear an animal feels when it scents in the air about it the threat of a hunt. In the face of universal anxiety (the looming devastation of the First World War) Schiele’s figures become helpless animals. Thus the distortion, the nakedness, the emaciation, the solitude of couples, as if all suffering were physical. There were moments when Schiele was confronted by violent thoughts: love as unseizable, comfort impossible. His brief, intense life (Schiele died at the of age 28) lived amidst the turmoil of a disintegrating empire (Austro-Hungarian), the demoralization by the first global war and the attendant revolutions in Europe, the pervading theories of Freud and Lenin which accepted acts of violence, and a series of unrecorded incidents which shook the entire consciousness of the world had a particularly devastating effect on the individual. The human body is, in Schiele’s art, an expression of history.

When I say Schiele paints like someone locked in a cell, I say it not only in metaphorical terms but also as a kind of experience. When he paints he enters into the other’s body only to enter his own. He searches and finds what he already knows: the transient nature of pleasure and the enduring pain. He was fascinated by the human body for its capacity to carry and endure the weight of consciousness; of its receptiveness to objects, to events and above all, to human contact. Most of the figures are drawn with eyes looking at the spectator, as if saying: “Look at me, touch me, complete me.” But we, the spectators, are not invited as voyeurs, nor as surgeons, but something more personal, more attached, like a sort of companion. He wants us



to enter the image/the body to search beyond the flesh and bones of anatomy, a contact, not strange but familiar. A human contact that will allow us to reach the pain of the other's body, and perhaps by looking with love and patience we might perceive and sense it in our own. And in this act of generosity the possibility of sharing each other's pain might lead to more than the experience of fleeting pleasure.

Listen again to the voice of Adrienne Rich:

“Whatever happens with us, your body  
will haunt mine...  
your touch on me, firm, protective, searching  
me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers  
reaching where I had been waiting for years for you  
... whatever happens, this is.”



# sea spirit

lauren m. elfring





# yearbook pantoum

carson sandell

Kindergartners lined up in black and white,  
boys photographed mid-shove on metal benches  
girls allongé in laughter. Torn jeans and hair spikes  
I wish I could tap dance out from those trenches

Boys photographed mid-shove on metal benches,  
though I wasn't pushed, they clocked truth before me.  
I wish I could tap dance out from those trenches  
I would ripple like ribbon and cambré into a C

Though I wasn't pushed, they clocked truth before me.  
Nauseated, knocked to knees, I begged for ballet shoes,  
I would ripple like ribbon and cambré into a C  
a stardust beauty laced in layers of iridescent blues.

Nauseated, knocked to knees, I begged for ballet shoes.  
Joy is a bike with bells and a basket; cornsilk curtains,  
a stardust beauty laced in layers of iridescent blues  
not half-shattered smiles. I know for certain

Joy is a bike with bells and a basket, cornsilk curtains,  
midnight makeup; beauty hidden by moonlit dread  
not half-shattered smiles. I know for certain  
closed door transformations saved ash from windspread

Midnight makeup, beauty hidden by moonlit dread.  
Clouded irises surrounded on a page of youthful radiance  
closed door transformations saved ash from widespread.  
Oh my true teenage soul faded like everlasting gradients

Clouded irises surrounded on a page of youthful radiance,  
a childhood spent tip-toeing around murky manhood.  
Oh my true teenage soul faded like everlasting gradients  
if I could pirouette back to reclaim myself I would

# falling to pieces

rebecca cuthbert

It was a tiny tear at first—barely noticeable.

Just her left ring finger detaching a bit. No big deal. Leah added a strip of silver duct tape and hid that with a flesh-colored bandage, then she got back to work, answering the phone and greeting customers and hustling hustling hustling at Giovanni's Ristorante in the city's second-trendiest neighborhood.

By the next weekend the finger had come clean off, and the other four fingers on that hand were separating too, but Leah fixed it with more duct tape and fancy, elbow-length gloves that she sort of liked. They made her feel elegant, even though she was just handing out menus and wine lists and rolls of polished silverware.

Plus, with her hands covered, and especially her left one, random dudes sitting at the bar stopped making bad jokes about how she wasn't wearing a ring—a precursor, Leah knew, to hitting on her which would never go their way, because all *she* wanted was for Christine, the bartender with the cropped red hair and capable hands, to notice her.

She willed Christine to look at her in quiet moments, thinking hard at her, feeling harder. But Christine didn't, or at least not when Leah was looking at her. The fall months passed and Leah taped her fingers on and brushed lint from her black gloves after rolling silverware, and she looked and she sighed but Christine, whose hands moved like a street magician's trick in the bar's recessed lighting, didn't look back.

#

In January, things got worse.

Leah's right foot snapped off as she was leaving work on an icy Thursday night. She cursed as she landed in gray sidewalk slush that soaked her thighs numb—cursed the heels she wore, the city she lived in, the bleak winter that seemed in the muffled frozen thick of it like it would never, never end.

Giovanni, whose real name was Gary but no one was allowed to call him that, insisted the hostesses wear black high heels, black dresses too short to comfortably bend over in and jewelry if they wanted, but only if it looked expensive.

No pants. No long skirts. No boots. So, no tape.

And how would Leah attract Christine or anyone else for that matter if she couldn't even keep herself together, couldn't keep herself composed, couldn't do the basic, impossible job of being a whole, sufficient woman?

She tucked her foot into her purse and let her tears join the slush and gravel and road salt she crawled through to get to her car at the far end of the narrow parking lot.

#

The superglue had to be reapplied every two to three hours, and chipped bone at the ankle meant her foot didn't fit exactly back into place. Leah hoped customers wouldn't look down as she led them to their tables. She tried not to limp or wince or grimace or tell the truth when people asked, out of politeness and not curiosity, how she was doing.

And she reminded herself, every day in the mirror, first thing in the morning and before bed at night, that she was making it work. More or less.

Some days less. Most days, less. And Christine still wasn't looking back at her, or maybe she was but how could Leah know and even if Christine was, it wasn't—it probably wasn't—the same way Leah looked at her.

And trying to problem-solve loose body parts was a slippery slope, Leah found. Before she knew it, she was overcompensating and solutions became their own troubles.

Leah focused on her face and head, hoping to distract people from her foot and hand that, she knew, flopped a little when she wasn't careful. She braided in hair extensions, sweeping them over her shoulder in a low ponytail she hoped Christine would like. Dangling rhinestone earrings shimmered in the candleflicker of Giovanni's mood-lit dining room and brought out the gold flecks in her gray eyes. Fringed, fake lashes added drama or at least the illusion of it.

When she passed Christine on her way to the kitchen for more clean silverware on a busy night in mid-February, ponytail drooping and sweat smudging her eye makeup, Christine looked back.

#

It was near the end of March when the hair extensions, growing out by then, pulled part of Leah's scalp free from her skull. It folded over her ear like a banana peel—her ear which, Leah saw with dismay, was tearing away from her head, top to bottom, dragged down by her fabulous earrings.

Also, the fake lashes weren't doing her eyelids any favors.

She bought more superglue, and at work, tried to hide her face from Christine, even though now, Christine looked back more times than she didn't.

Giovanni noticed something was wrong—maybe not quite what, but he told Leah at the end of a Friday shift that she'd been looking unkempt and he didn't know if it was emotional problems or what, but if she didn't clean herself up he was going to have to put her in the back as a salad girl, if he kept her on at all.

So Leah tried harder. Double-sided tape, smaller earrings, staples, an expensive wig. Keeping her weight on her left foot for a six-hour shift wasn't easy and after the last diner left and she could blow out the candles and wipe down the menus and sweep beneath the tables, she was spent.

It got harder and harder to face herself in the mirror as she repeated her mantra, as she told herself she was doing it, she was making it work, she'd figure it out, she'd keep figuring it out, it would all work out.

And in better news or worse, depending, Christine looked at her three times in the first week

of April alone—as Christine washed bar glasses and Leah rolled silverware, as Christine restocked the wine rack and Leah Clorox-wiped door knobs, as Christine stood, motionless, behind the bar and Leah stopped, mid-stride, on her way to turn the muzak down.

But Leah didn't have the nerve to talk to Christine—not now, not with the way Leah was feeling and what she looked like, despite her best efforts. A smashed marionette.

Giovanni kept a close eye on her, and Leah tried to stand up straight at the hostess podium, to smile with teeth at him and at every guest who walked through the doors—an act both aggressive and compliant, a sign hard to read, a weapon against suspicion and small talk.

Her teeth, at least, were whole and even.

#

On a Monday night in May, a night that was busier than it should have been long after the dinner rush with the kitchen closed and last call called, half the bar stools still sat full. Three businessmen sucked down flights of craft beer, a woman in a dress that was probably Versace sipped white wine, and an old guy held a glass of straight bourbon in his gnarled fingers but didn't drink it.

Too many people to fall down in front of, though even half that number would have been, but that's what Leah did. She'd forgotten to reapply the superglue holding her foot on, and when she headed toward the kitchen to run the candleholders through the dishwasher well—it just broke off, easy as half a graham cracker at the seams.

She fell forward, catching herself on one of the red leather bar stools thankfully unoccupied. She hauled herself up and onto it after hopping twice on her remaining foot, wishing she could dissolve into the grout between the fake marble floor tiles.

People stared, of course, it not being a daily occurrence to see a foot lying apart from its rightful owner. But then Giovanni came around the corner and he saw too, and his face darkened to the shade of russet potatoes, fists clenching into angry little balls.

He took a few steps toward Leah when someone—Christine—shoved him aside.

"Move, Gary," she said, "I'm going on break," and maybe because he was surprised, or maybe because he was embarrassed by his boring name being said out loud, he did move, sidestepping to take Christine's place behind the bar.

Leah watched all this through a blur of tears. She felt like a jackass in front of these people, in front of Christine, but she was scared, too—she needed this job, and worried, because if she'd damaged her ankle further, how would she ever get her foot to stay on? But none of those emotions had time to seep in fully because Christine was heading straight for her, looking straight at her, and Leah held her breath.

Christine leaned over and picked up Leah's foot. Then she approached and bent to one knee, holding up the foot like an offering, like it was something precious, and being one of the only two feet Leah had, of course, it was.

Leah looked miserably at her retrieved foot but then noticed, for the first time because she'd never been this close to Christine before, the tiny, careful stitches holding Christine's hands on. The thread matched the insides of her pale wrists perfectly, looking more like textured skin than lines of silk or nylon. The precision was beautiful.

Leah exhaled and whispered "Yours, too?" She took her foot back, fingertips brushing Christine's.

“Mine, too,” Christine said. Half her mouth bent into a smile and she stood, wrapping an arm around Leah’s waist to help her up.

Leah smiled back without showing her teeth, and together, the women rounded the bar, heading for the kitchen and the restaurant’s back door and, hopefully, Leah thought and maybe Christine did too, toward something else still too fragile to name.

But “*Leah*” Giovanni said before they got far and his voice was a sharp knife; the women stopped. He gripped the edge of the bar and leaned toward them. “You better pull yourself together by the week-end. I mean it.”

Leah thought he probably did and as she and Christine pushed through the swinging doors and whatever was going to happen, she thought she probably would pull herself together but maybe, also, she wouldn’t, and if not, well, there would always be whatever happened after that, the next bridge to come to, to look at, to cross perhaps (or maybe not), but she didn’t have to think about any of it at that moment, and instead, she concentrated on how Christine’s hand felt snug around her torso, like she was holding Leah together, and how nice it felt to be held together, how right there and then even with her detached foot clenched in her hand like a prize she’d earned and not lost, things were more or less and actually more than less okay. Maybe better, even, than that.

# contributors



# poetry

**Randi Clemens** is a poet, editor, and educator who lives in Michigan. She holds an MFA from Northern Michigan University where she previously served as the Managing Editor of *Passages North* and taught creative writing. Her work can be found online or is forthcoming with *DIAGRAM*, *Okay Donkey*, *Pidgeonholes*, *LandLocked* and other various journals.

**Pragya Dhiman** is a twenty-year-old Indian student residing in Delhi, India, who has just graduated with her Bachelor's Degree in English Literature from University of Delhi. Her research work in literature has been published in various literary journals including, *American Research Journal of English and Literature*, *IJELS Research Journal*, *The Literary Herald*, and more. Her creative work has been published or is forthcoming in literary magazines such as *Muse India*, *Tint Journal*, *Teen Ink* (digital and print), *Muse-Pie Press's - Shot Glass Journal*, *Free library of the Internet Void*, *Genre: Urban Arts*, *Poet's Choice* (print) and more. Her writing is a reflection of the inner workings of her mind, and she also takes inspiration from her dreams and night-terrors.

**Max Gillette** is an English major at Central Michigan University, where they work as an editor for two student-led publications. Their poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Spoonie Magazine*, *Cutbow Quarterly*, *Morning Fruit Magazine*, *Rainy Day*, and other journals.

**Jasmine Kaur** (she/her) is a punjabi, queer writer/artist. She likes to surround herself with stories and poetics in any medium, including audio, video, still images and performance. Some of her work has been published by ...ongoing..., *streetcake magazine*, and *Tilt* (by QueerAbad). You can find parts of her on the internet at <https://sites.google.com/view/jasmine-kaur/> or @trying0000 on Twitter and @jasmineismeltingintosummer on Instagram.

**Cara Peterhansel** (she/her) is a queer poet from Connecticut. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Sarah Lawrence College. Her work explores the intersections of disability, injury, mental illness, queerness, and intimacy. Her work has previously appeared in *Stone of Madness*, *Kissing Dynamite*, and *The Laurel Review*. She can be found online at [carapeterhansel.com](http://carapeterhansel.com) and @CPeterhansel on Twitter.

**Gretchen Rockwell** is a queer poet who can frequently be found writing about gender, science, space, and unusual connections. Xe is the author of the chapbooks *body in motion* (perhappened press) and *Lexicon of Future Selves* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press) and two microchapbooks; xer work has appeared in *AGNI*, *Cotton Xenomorph*, *Whale Road Review*, *Palette Poetry*, and elsewhere. Find xer at [www.gretchenrockwell.com](http://www.gretchenrockwell.com) or on Twitter at @daft\_rockwell.

**Carson Sandell** (they/them) is a Trans poet from San Jose, CA. They are studying Creative Writing with a concentration in Poetry at UC Riverside. Their work has appeared in *Dissonance Magazine*, *Windows Facing Windows*, *Drunk Monkey Magazine*, *Wrongdoing Magazine*, *Fahmidan Journal*, and *Full House Magazine*, and more.

**Carina Stopenski** (they/them) is a writer, librarian, and educator based in Pittsburgh, PA. They hold a BFA in Creative Writing from Chatham University, an MSLS in Library Science from Clarion University, and an MA in Literary and Cultural Studies from Carnegie Mellon University. Their work focuses on queerness, disembodiment, and transhumanism. Carina's poetry has most recently been featured in *The Closed Eye Open*, *Silver Rose Magazine*, and the anthology *Beyond Queer Words*, among others.

# fiction

**Najla Brown** traded West Texas' oil pump-jacks for Houston's oil skyscrapers. She spends her days writing taglines and her nights writing everything else. Her work can be found in *The New York Times*, *Redivider*, *Bridge Eight*, and elsewhere.

**Rebecca Cuthbert** (she/her) writes speculative, slipstream, and dark fiction and poetry. She loves ghost stories, folklore, witchy women, and anything that involves nature getting revenge. Her poem "Still Love" is forthcoming in *Nocturne Magazine*. For publications and more, visit [rebeccacuthbert.com](http://rebeccacuthbert.com).

**Susan Ito** is the author of *The Mouse Room*. She co-edited the anthology *A Ghost At Heart's Edge: Stories & Poems of Adoption*. Her work has appeared in *Growing Up Asian American*, *Choice*, *Hip Mama*, *Literary Mama*, *Catapult*, *Hyphen*, *The Bellevue Literary Review*, and elsewhere. She is a MacDowell colony Fellow, and has also been awarded residencies at The Mesa Refuge, Hedgebrook and the Blue Mountain Center. Her theatrical adaptation of *Untold*, stories of reproductive stigma, was produced at Brava Theater. She is a member of the Writers Grotto, and teaches at Mills College and Bay Path University.

**Francesca Leader** is a self-taught writer interested in exploring gender- and culture-based conflicts. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Wigleaf*, *Fictive Dream*, *the J Journal*, *the William and Mary Review*, *CutBank*, *Coffin Bell*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, and elsewhere.

# creative nonfiction

**Carlo Rey Lacsamana** is a Filipino born and raised in Manila, Philippines. Since 2005, he has been living and working in the Tuscan town of Lucca, Italy. He regularly contributes to journals in the Philippines, writing politics, culture, and art. His works have been published in magazines in the U.S., Canada, U.K., Italy, Germany, The Netherlands, Scotland, India, China and Mexico.

**Megan E. O'Laughlin** writes nonfiction and works as a psychotherapist specializing in trauma recovery. She is an MFA candidate at Ashland University. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in the *Blackfork Review* and *The Bluebird Word*. She lives in Washington state.

**Leticia Urieta** (she/her/hers) is a Tejana writer from Austin, TX. She works as a teaching artist in the Austin community and is the Regional Program Manager for Austin Bat Cave. She is a graduate of Agnes Scott College and holds an MFA in Fiction writing from Texas State University. Her chapbook, *The Monster* is out now from Libro-Mobile Press. Her hybrid collection, *Las Criaturas*, which was a finalist for the Sergio Troncoso Award for Best First Book of Fiction 2022 from the Texas Institute of Letters, is out now from FlowerSong Press.

# art

**Ann Calandro** is a writer, artist, and classical piano student. Her short stories have been published in literary journals, including *The Vincent Brothers Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Lit Camp*, *The Fabulist*, and *The Plentitudes*. *Duck Lake Books* published her poetry chapbook in 2020. Calandro's artwork has been exhibited in juried shows, awarded prizes, and published in print and online. Shanti Arts published her three illustrated children's books. See artwork and a list of publications at [www.anncalandro.webs.com](http://www.anncalandro.webs.com)

**Lauren M. Elfring** is a watercolor artist and elementary art teacher living in Baltimore, Maryland. She is especially inspired by nature and loves being near water, whether it's a lake at the foot of a mountain, the Chesapeake Bay, or the Atlantic Ocean.

**Erica Matthews** is an emerging artist based in Kingston, NY. With an artistic past in floral design and creation, much of her current work focuses on themes of life, death, and what it means to be temporary, through living flora expression, skeletal prompts, and creatures of flight, such as butterflies.

**Nikitha Nair** is an Indian animator and illustrator. She is currently pursuing her Masters in Animation Design at IDC, IIT Bombay, India.

**Morphic Rooms** is the collaborative collage laboratory of allison anne and Jeremy P. Bushnell. They produce layered, abstract work that utilizes systematic parameters, creative rulesets, chance operations, and collaborative interplay as tools for radically reimagining a collection of images, texts, ephemera, and detritus, drawn from centuries of cultural accretion and mechanical reproduction. Their work has appeared in *Sleepingfish*, *YouAreHere*, *INKIII*, *the gamut mag*, and a chapbook published by Paper View Books. Learn more at [morphicrooms.com](http://morphicrooms.com)

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