SIFTING THE FEMININE BONES:

ESSAYS

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

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ESSAYS

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Sifting the Feminine Bones: Essays is a two-part project of critical analysis and creative nonfiction that examines how literary, cultural, and social constructions of femininity and the ways in which they influence our understanding of feminine identities. The critical introduction, “Resisting Definitions,” takes a cross-disciplinary approach to examine how creative writers can reconceptualize the essay considering current conversations in the field of creative writing regarding inclusivity. When creative writers engage in the approach suggested in “Resisting Definitions,” they see that our understanding of the essay changes when writers consider genre from the standpoint of rhetorical genre studies (RGS) and when thinking about the relationship between theories of genre and gender. Ultimately, this introduction argues that the essay is a genre that is feminine in its gendering and methodological approach to knowledge creation and extraction.

The creative nonfiction component of this project is a collection of personal, lyric, and hermit crab essays that look at the writer’s understanding of femininity in light of illness and disease. *Sifting the Feminine Bones* examines how illness and disease changes not only the physical body, but also considers the writer’s evolving understanding of femininity and the stories our identities ask us to tell. This essay collection gathers those stories of identity rooted in a changed and changing body and works to break down constructions of femininity rooted in the body. The writer’s deconstruction becomes a way of interrogating how the writer understands her body and the standards against which it has been measured and judged. *Sifting the Feminine Bones* also reflects on the challenges people face when their femininity resides outside the boundaries of supposed normalcy.

Resisting Definitions:
The Essay as Genre and Social Action
Dissertation Critical Introduction

Introduction

It's time that we, as writers, have a conversation about the essay. The essay, which has long been thought of as a form, is a genre.

But why? Why is this important now?

This conversation is important for two reasons. First and foremost, understanding the essay as a genre in and of itself creates critical opportunities for writers. In acknowledging texts as fluid and not confined to a specific set of rules and regulations, we can begin to expand the essay as a space for voices that have been marginalized by other genres. Through this expansion of genre, and by understanding the relationship between gender and genre as performative and capable of igniting change, we can begin to locate the essay as an active form of resistance. This opens a critical space where we as writers can work to redefine what it means to tell true stories and to tell them well.

Additionally, this conversation is important given the direction that the field of creative writing is moving in thinking about diversity, equity, and accessibility. Books such as Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* and Matthew Salesses' *Craft in the Real World* have focused on structural inequities in the creative writing classroom that have been perpetuated by the workshop model frequently used in these classrooms. Known as the Iowa model or the silent author workshop, this method of conducting creative writing workshops further reinforces the silencing of marginalized voices, an aspect that Chavez and Salesses both take issue with and present alternatives to in their work. This conversation extends beyond the classroom to include thoughtful inquiries into how we think about access to publication and who is being published, the nature and/or necessity of advanced degrees, as well as the financial and commitment demands that create barriers for writers who are women, parents, people of color, disabled, LGBTQ+, or belong to a wide variety of communities.

These conversations are extremely important, but writers also need to consider the ways in which writing itself also factors into this conversation. We, as a field, need to expand our conversations past the parameters of craft to include reflection on our methods of categorization and understanding, which are a critical part of this conversation. This revisiting of what we write, how we write, and why we write could help expand our ideas as to what creating space for a wide range of voices means and looks like. Undertaking such a task also involves looking at both our creative and theoretical frameworks to understand how, as a field, creative writing has gotten to where we are today.

This essay will look at the relationships between genre and gender to help us understand the capabilities and capacities of the essay. In focusing on the essay as an active exploration of categorization and experiences, we must note how the essay allows for explorations of individual and community experiences. The flexibility of the essay, which has historically resisted attempts by writers and literary scholars to impose a set framework upon it, creates unique opportunities for writers. Other genres of creative writing, such as fiction and poetry, do not foster these possibilities in the same way as the essay because of the conventions of those genres. To facilitate this examination, I will first outline a taxonomy of the essay itself and how thinking about genre from a cross-disciplinary approach changes our categorical understandings of genre and form. Next, I will look at how theories of gender can be applied to the essay as a way of understanding what the essay can do once writers reconceptualize the essay as a genre.

Later, I will look at the ways in which I can apply these theories and connections to essays from Michele de Montaigne and to Jenny Boully's work *The Body: An Essay*. My analysis of Montaigne's work is supported by Nancy Mairs' analysis of the essay being gendered as feminine and because Montaigne has been established as one of the historical roots of the essay as writers and scholars of creative nonfiction have conceptualized this type of writing. In moving from Montaigne to Jenny Boully, I will look at *The Body: An Essay* as an example of how the essay is not only gendered feminine, but also serves as an example of how writers of all gender identities can navigate the relationship between gender and genres of creative writing.

Shifting Perspective: A Taxonomy of the Essay

In having a conversation about the essay, how writers conceptualize the essay in terms of its place within a taxonomy of genre, and the opportunities this reimagining of the essay offers, it is important to first understand how genres function. Instead of thinking about genre from the standpoint of literary studies, I am approaching genre from the perspective of rhetorical genre studies (RGS) to reconsider the ways in which we as creative writers think about and classify the essay, and to open this conversation to a cross-disciplinary approach that connects RGS and the essay.

Working within this cross-disciplinary approach, one perspective that is particularly fitting for the essay and its relationship to genre is to think of genre, as

Carolyn R. Miller does, as a form of social action. In her article “Genre as Social Action,” a foundational text in RGS, Miller argues, “A genre becomes a complex of formal and substantive features that create a particular effect in a given situation…Genre, in this way, becomes more than a formal entity; it becomes pragmatic, fully rhetorical, a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action” (153). The key piece in Miller’s explanation is the idea of social action and what influence Miller’s idea of social action has on our understanding of genre. Of this, Miller writes, “If genre represents action, it must involve situation and motive, because human action, whether symbolic or otherwise, is interpretable only against a context of situation and through the attributing of motives” (152). In other words, Miller conceptualizes genres as social action because genre provides a framework within which writers can respond to a variety of human actions at a variety of levels, including the symbolic.

In my reading of Miller’s work, genre acts as a methodology writers can use as a method of exploration – or “social action,” as Miller’s terminology suggests – to understand not only the situations to which a writer may be writing about, through, around, etc. Thinking of genre as an actionable methodology also helps us to understand the motivations of a particular writer and their work. Later in “Genre as Social Action,” Miller reframes the idea of genre as social action in a methodological context, writing, “The classification I am advocating is, in effect, ethnomethodological: it seeks to explicate the knowledge that practice creates” (155). What Miller is arguing for is an understanding of genre that allows writers and readers to extract knowledge from a practice; in other words, genre creates a method by which we can make sense and meaning out of experience. Making sense and meaning out of experience is exactly what essays do in a methodological sense. Essays wander. They explore. They weigh and try and help us to reflect and process knowledge that writers extract from practice which, for the essayist, is the practice of life itself.

What about creative nonfiction, though? If the essay is a genre, then where do writers then place this thing we call creative nonfiction? Building on the work of Anis S. Barwash and Mary Jo Reiff in their book *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*, I would position creative nonfiction itself at the level of a meta-genre, defined by Janet Giltrow as “atmospheres surrounding genres” (Giltrow qtd. in Bawarsh and Reiff 94). Meta-genres function to create a shared background of knowledge as to how writers and composers produce and negotiate genres within established systems of expression (Bawarsh and Reiff 94). When thinking about creative nonfiction this way, the emphasis on telling true stories creates an atmosphere or environment from which the essay emerges to respond to practices within an established methodological framework. For example, creative nonfiction provides an atmosphere or environment in which writers draw from a background of shared knowledge as to how we write about the lived experiences of ourselves and others. Within creative nonfiction, then, the essay as a genre provides a set of practices and methods – such as the emphasis on scene writing and various kinds of research and reflection – that writers then use as they write.

In this vein of thought, other types of creative writing, such as fiction, also become elevated to the level of meta-genre because of the ways in which characteristics of fiction – primarily its emphasis on telling stories that are not, to some degree, true-to-life – create an atmosphere within which writers create works of fiction. This then means, using the same logic in relation to the essay and genre, the novel and the short story then rise to the level of genre because they act as a methodology writers use when working within the atmosphere that fiction provides. Types of fiction such as the detective novel would function at the level of form since the adjective *detective* and the style in which many of these works are written provide directions for the reader to interact with the text in a certain way.

By extension, one can also argue that the other kinds of creative nonfiction writing that Margot Singer and Nicole Walker mention in their introduction to *Bending Genre* as the main forces behind the creative nonfiction movement – the essay, the memoir, and literary journalism – also function at the level of genre because of how they frame and provide background information for writers to extract knowledge from practice in a variety of different ways. “The burgeoning literary genre of creative nonfiction --,” write Singer and Walker, “including lyric and personal essays, narrative journalism, and memoir – stands at the vanguard of this moment” (1). While I disagree with the taxonomy of Singer and Walker’s claim that creative nonfiction exists at the level of genre because of how RGS frames and understands genre, writers can argue for elevating memoir and narrative/literary journalism to the level of genre when we think about practices, methods, and social action. Vivian Gornick, in her book *The Situation and The Story*, describes the memoir as “the focus [of the essay]…reversed” (77). Narrative or literary journalism combines reporting with methods from other discipline. In the introduction to *The Art of Literary Journalism*, Norman Sims and Mark Kramer write, “The liveliness of literary journalism, which critics compare to fiction, comes from the combining this personal engagement with perspectives from sociology and anthropology, memoir writing, fiction, history, and standard reporting" (19). Each of these genres – essay, memoir, and narrative/literary journalism – approach the extraction of knowledge from practice from a different perspective using methods and craft in a variety of ways, even if these methods and elements of craft are applicable across genres.

The issue with the essay as a genre, though, is that not all writers see the essay as having such a place within genre-based frameworks of classification. The issue I take with this stance is that the essay does not have enough consistent definable edges for us to be sure of the essay as a form. In thinking about how the essay has been defined, especially in looking at the work of Adorno and Gornick, the ways we have come to establish definable edges are not necessarily formal characteristics of the essay but instead focus on what the essay does or does not do.

In thinking about genre versus form, Miller writes that form functions more as a set of instructions to the reader on how to perceive or interpret content in a certain way, which causes audiences to anticipate, appreciate, or respond accordingly. Miller writes, "Form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret; this guidance disposes the audience to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond in a certain way" (159). In other words, form is a method of categorization that allows writers to provide their audiences with instructions on *how* to read their work, what to expect, and how to respond to their material. The social action of the essay genre also provides instructions for the writer as to how they can think about the relationship between knowledge and practice. There are ways to think of the essay genre and how form fits into this taxonomy, though, when writers take into consideration the number of ways an essay can be shaped and molded to guide a reader's response. Personal essays, lyric essays, hermit crab essays, or even speculative essays, provide instructions for readers so that, to borrow from Miller, readers “anticipate, appreciate, or respond accordingly” because of the ways a writer uses language and craft on the page.

The Essay as Genre and Resistance as Social Action

Before moving on, now is a good time to recap this reimagined taxonomy of the essay. Creative nonfiction, instead of functioning at the level of genre, instead exists as a meta-genre, providing an atmosphere or environment in which genres exist. The essay, then, is positioned at the level of genre because the characteristics of the essay provide writers with a methodology by which they can extract knowledge from practice. This also elevates other types of creative nonfiction, such as the memoir and literary journalism, to the level of genre. Finally, types of writing such as the personal essay, lyric essay, the hermit crab essay, etc. are positioned at the level of form because the unique qualities of each of these forms provide instructions to the reader as to how they should respond to a writer’s methodology. This new understanding of how types of writing are situated within a taxonomy of genre is in light of conversations we as creative writers could and should be having with scholars of rhetorical genre studies, keeping in mind Miller’s theories about genre as social action.

To see how the essay achieves this, now is the time to look at exactly how the essay is a genre within this understanding of how genres work. On way to achieve this is to look at the essay from a historical perspective since genres evolve and change over time based on the needs of those who are using them. Theodor Adorno, in “The Essay as

Form," after describing the German resistance to the essay itself, writes, "The essay, however, does not permit its domain to be described" (152). For Adorno, the essay's resistance stems from the method through which an essay explores its subject matter and arrives at knowledge or understanding. Science, which Adorno uses as an example, insists on defining the subject before critiquing "for the sake of the undisturbed security of their operation" (160). The essay, however, resists this stance and works in contrast to scientific thought by struggling, wandering, or weighing out of an obligation to its subject matter.

By thinking about the essay as a genre and genre as social action, Adorno's understanding of the essay in "The Essay as Form" and its ability to make sense of its subject matter is resistant to the processes by which science and other fields understand knowledge and practice. Adorno writes:

> With regard to scientific procedure and its philosophic grounding as method, the essay, in accordance with its idea, draws the fullest consequences from the critique of the system. Even the empiricist doctrines that grant priority to open, unanticipated experience over firm, conceptual ordering remain systemic to the extent that they investigate what they hold to be more or less constant pre-conditions of knowledge and develop them in as continuous a context as possible. Since the time of Bacon, who was himself an essayist, empiricism – no less than rationalism – has been "method." (157)

Instead of defining the subject before working through one's knowledge of a practice, the essay's version of social action works in reverse, where writers are often working through a practice or an experience to uncover or work through how that practice or experience helps the writer to understand its significance. By allowing the focus of a writer's work to define itself throughout the writing process, the essay genre uses Miller's social action as a resistance to Adorno's idea that knowledge creation and extraction must be undisturbed and secure. The essay, therefore, creates a system of knowing that, by design, allows for exploration.

Another key piece in understanding the essay as a genre is to think about what the essay does with this resistance. Adorno describes the essay as taking an alternative methodological approach to its subject matter, writing, "Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creative something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done" (152). Although each writer's methodology is different, the essay is, by design – at least, in Adorno's sense – a method through which writers can look at what others have already done and begin to process and extract some form of knowledge. The practices, in the case of the essay, might be entirely our own, which contradicts Adorno's idea that the essay grapples with what "others have already done." What this does not contradict, though, is Miller's thoughts on extracting knowledge from practice. Either way, Adorno's definition of the essay in terms of the genre's methodological attributes aligns with Miller's explanation of genre as social action within the same methodological context despite differences in fields and historical moments from which Adorno and Miller wrote: Adorno as a theorist in the late 1930s and Miller writing as a genre scholar in 1984.

When talking about methodology, though, it is also important to think about the tools that the essay uses, particularly the persona, to make its particular methodology happen. In her book *The Situation and The Story*, Gornick defines the essay's methodological tools in opposition to the ways in which writers would balance similar elements of craft and technique in memoir. Gornick writes that a test "is an essay rather than a memoir because the writer is using her persona to explore a subject other than herself" (77). To make the essay's social action, its methodology, happen, the essay must use the persona as an entry point into the practices of others. In this instance, Gornick's conceptualization of the essay not only emphasizes a particular process that defines what the essay is as a genre, but also stresses the importance of the tools a writer needs to extract knowledge from a particular set of social actions, of practices, within the framework of a particular genre.

Thinking about the essay as a genre and the essay as using social action as a methodology also helps us as creative writers discuss the essay in new ways, especially when we consider the direction in which creative writing as a field is going. Perhaps Brian Dillon's statement in *Essayism: On Form, Feeling, and Nonfiction* makes a point about how we as writers think about the essay:

> I have no clue how to write about the essay as a stable entity or established class, how to trace its history diligently from uncertain origins through successive phrases of literary dominance and abeyance, to its present status as modest publishing revenant: the genre (please do not call it "creative non-fiction") on which many writers' and readers' hopes are hung, many print and online columns filled with reflections on whether non-fiction is the new fiction, the essay the new novel, confession the new invention. (13)

Despite his attitude towards creative nonfiction, Dillion's uneasiness about how to write about the essay helps to make an argument for looking at the essay as a genre. If we as creative writers think about the essay and its relationship to genre from the perspective of RGS instead of from the angle of literary studies, then it is possible to use the vocabulary we already have to describe the essay – the weighing, the trying, the wander, the resistance – in new ways to reflect the social action aspect of genre and what the essay *does* instead of what the essay *is*.

This then creates what Dillon describes as a “stable entity or established class,” meaning that the essay, like other literary genres, is constantly evolving and changing as the needs of writers and readers change, or to use Dillon’s phrasing, as writers and readers turn to the supposedly “new invention.” Shifting our perspective on how we examine genre and where the essay exists and functions helps to create what Dillon calls a “stable entity or established class” by thinking about the essay’s conventions as methodologies instead of attributes. Even if aspects of the essay genre change over time, thinking about genre from the perspective of RGS helps to create Dillon’s stable entity or established class by establishing that genre is active, a way of doing instead a way of being. Maybe the “new invention” Dillon speaks of is not confession or the most recent wave of popularity that creative nonfiction and the essay are enjoying. Instead, this new invention is the ways in which we think and talk about creative nonfiction, confession – or the essay itself.

The Essay as a Feminine Genre

Let’s remember how we got here. By approaching the relationship between the essay and genre from the perspective of rhetorical genre studies (RGS) instead of literary studies, we as creative writers can reimagine how we place the essay within a taxonomy of genre. Now that the essay is understood as a genre as opposed to a form, the essay's new place within a taxonomy of genre allows us as writers to think about the attributes of the essay as a methodology, or as Miller describes in her article "Genre as Social Action," a way of extracting knowledge from practice. Since this understanding of the essay as a genre encourages us to understand that the essay genres *does* things instead of *is* things, we can now understand the essay as a stable entity even though part of the essay's methodology is resisting definition.

So if the essay is a genre and not something else, then what can writers do with this new understanding now that the essay has been placed within a different taxonomy, a different framework of knowledge and understanding?

One such use for this classification of the essay is to think about other types of identification with which genre shares characteristics or approaches. Kazim Ali, in his essay "Genre-Queer: Notes Against Generic Binaries," asks an important question about the ideas of both genre and gender. "What if genre, like gender," Ali writes, "is fluid, *constructed*: by the publisher, critic, reader, *even writer*" (29, emphasis original). It is entirely possible that, in looking at genre as action and gender as performative[1], that Ali has a good point here. Genre and gender[2] are seen as methods of action by critics and scholars, and over time, writers and individuals have changed the boundaries of both genre and gender through explorations of their work. If writers were to think about the parallels of genre and gender, this approach might create possibilities for writers of particular communities to write about their lives.

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[1] In her book *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Judith Butler questions whether there is a difference between the performance of gender and the performative nature of discourse. She concludes that they are inherently linked, writing, "On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a 'one,' to become visible as a 'one,' where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms" (177). The performance of gender and genre are linked in that one cannot exist without the other; it is the performance of using discourse to communicate the gender of a body at birth as determined by someone else that determines how an individual is going to perform a particular gender.

[2] Both gender and genre act as systems of categorization. As David Lazar writes in his "Queering the Essay" in *Bending Genre*, "Genre and gender are indissolubly linked,

Adding a gendered[3] understanding of genre to this conversation helps us to understand that this different way of thinking about the essay not only falls in line with conversations the field of creative writing is having and the direction in which the field is heading, but to also see where those conversations came from. In reality, this conversation has been going on in bits and pieces for longer than we as writers may have thought, which is why it is important to revisit the works of writers and scholars like Ali and Rachel Blau DuPlessis to understand how we got to this point and why considering the essay as a feminine genre is still relevant and important today, even if revisiting this conversation also means recognizing the faults of these arguments when examined from a contemporary point of view.

Blau DuPlessis, writing about the relationship between gender and genre, argues in her essay "f-Words: An Essay on the Essay" that the essay has been and can be gendered as feminine. She writes, "The essay can claim a feminized space[4] in various

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etymologically intertwined. Clearly the two words emerge from an intertwined root system that speaks to typologies, distinctions, styles – and they are almost homonyms, fraternal twins" (15).

[3] It is important to note here that *feminine* should not be considered a part of the gender binary, as there are many genders. This could also create an opportunity for future conversation about the relationship among gender, genre, and text, as well as the possibilities that those conversations have for the ways in which writers think about writing.

[4] The relationship between the essay and gendered space is more complex than stated in Blau DuPlessis' article. This relationship also helps to support Kazim Ali's assertion that American writers in particular have the need to write into vexed spaces (35).

ways through interruption, through beginning again and again, through fragmentation and discontinuities, but most of all through its distrust of systems, its playful skepticism about generalization" (34). In making her argument, Blau DuPlessis draws from various definitions of the essay, including Adorno's claims that the essay is prone to error and is fragmented by nature, to capture not only the expansiveness of the essay genre but also the various ways in which the essay genre behaves and moves to better understand this particular type of writing (Blau DuPlessis 30, 37). Interruption, distrust, and the essay's

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In his book *The American Essay in the American Century,* Ned Stucky-French tracks not only the history of the essay through the twentieth century, but also brings together several spaces in which the essay found itself existing. During the Progressive Era, writes Stuckey-French, the spaces essays found themselves in changed from where readers previously found essays. Social changes during the late Victorian era, changes in the publishing industry, muckraking practices in journalism, and shifts in middle class identity due to increased home ownership in the suburbs changed not only what people read, but where they read those things (53). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the formerly gendered living spaces of a home – the drawing room or parlor for women (often somehow connected to or close to the kitchen) and the library or billiard room for men – slowly gave way to the parlor room at the front, often public, part of the home. As a new generation of homeowners raised in the middle class began to rethink attitudes toward the excess and clutter of their parents' homes, the parlor then gave way to the living room (Stuckey-French 56-58). At the same time, this new generation of the middle class became less focused on formality, which not only changed the design of homes, but changed the ways people acted toward one another in the home and what they read (Stuckey-French 58).

Around the same time as the changes in home design, essays began appearing alongside floorplans for these new houses in magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal*. From 1896 until 1919, *Ladies Home Journal* editor Edward Bok published these design plans alongside essays catered toward middle class women, even though the publication in and of itself was contradictory – not only were women moving out of the domestic space and into the work force at this time, but first wave feminism was also happening at this time, something that the magazine condemned despite supporting women's "liberation from the tedium of household tasks" (Stuckey-French 61-62). More and more women read essays not only about the domestic sphere but also read these essays within this space too, making the vexed spaces Ali speaks of even more vexing because of the role the genteel essay, the predecessor to the pieces which appeared in *Ladies Home Journal* and similar publications, and genteel essayists played in the history of the essay genre in American literary history.

ability to begin over and over again are just a few of the functions Blau DuPlessis argues help us think about the essay as a feminine genre. She adds, "One does not want to be imprisoned under the rubric *feminine*, but merely to benefit from it. Yet another feminine gesture, perhaps" (34, emphasis original).

To understand what Blau DuPlessis means by imprisonment "under the rubric *feminine*," we also need to know what she means by the rubric *feminine*. While Blau DuPlessis does not explicitly list the criteria contained within the rubric *feminine*, she does build an argument for what such a rubric could look like by drawing on other writers and scholars. To start, Blau DuPlessis writes:

> Given the rejection of mastery, the arrogant minority, the glimpses of intimate moments, the tracking of a wayward mind thinking, one can also see why the essay has been summed up by the term *feminine*, especially when, at the same time, a number of contemporary women write it to explore the possibility of female speech in culture. *Feminine* is a difficult and untrustworthy word, but it makes an exciting gesture, points to a major alteration in thought. Feminine by virtue of a certain wayward turning of practice. And of all the negatives of the feminine – the overdone, the exaggerated, the brazen, the wrong-headed, the prone to error, the needing correction the lack of proportion. Extravagance, said Thoreau, wandering around, eccentricity, excess, overdoing it in the strangest ways – why it's a description at one and the same time of The Essay and The Female of the Species. (33-34)

A criticism of Blau DuPlessis' groundwork for the rubric *feminine* could be that what this rubric is trying to determine is not femininity but queerness. In her essay "Essay (queer).

The. Essay. Queer. And. All. That," Francesca Rendle-Short explores the relationship between the essay and queerness. Rendle-Short uses Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* as an example of this relationship between the essay and queerness, arguing that Nelson queers the essay "good and proper" from the beginning because Nelson resists the order she has laid out for the essay (3). Rendle-Short writes, "She undermines her own thinking with this wildness, undercuts the stability of what she has just written and only a page before. She asks us to look at things another way…in other words, she asks what happens to the stuff that is in the margins, *between* those fragments of text, that is relegated to remaining outside language, to the matter of silence: that which is mute, unnameable, also undefined, queer" (3). It is entirely possible that, when looking at how Rendle-Short and Nelson in *The Argonauts* approach the essay genre, what Blau DuPlessis thought was the rubric *feminine* at the time she wrote could now be seen as the rubric *feminine* – and queerness as well.

To continue building this rubric, Blau DuPlessis draws on the work of Hélène Cixous to work through the rubric *feminine*. Of Cixous, Blau DuPlessis writes, "Like many manifestos ["The Laugh of the Medusa,"] it calls for the creation of something that is rhetorically palpable…and so the new time that is coming is already here in its own prose…It is a work millennial, apocalyptic, and filled with the interplay between political and spiritual energies often found in essays. In this work, exchanges among pronouns proclaim a new community – a border crossing among third, second, and first persons, both singular and plural" (36).

Additionally, Blau DuPlessis cites Luce Irigaray as she continues to build this rubric *feminine*. Of Irigaray, Blau DuPlessis writes:

> The unleashed female imaginary, valued and active, is a necessary precondition for the establishment of true heterogeneity and involves a triangulation among sexuality, critique, rhetoric. The heterogenous involves a multidirectional, whimsical, unfixed language, and it involves a voracious but imprecise desire that seems to transpire at once in rhetorical need, ideological critique, and sexual organs. (36)

Blau DuPlessis' and Irigaray's argument raise some concerns. Among these concerns is the emphasis on femininity being tied to a person's body. This approach is dangerous and exclusionary because of the underlying presumption that femininity is solely linked to particular bodies with a particular kind of anatomy[5]. Ali would also adamantly disagree with this assessment of gender and genre because of not only its reliance on the body itself, but also in the assigning of genre and gender based on the body.

For the rubric *feminine* to work in relation to a set of texts and to not be dangerous and exclusionary for people, femininity has to be separated from the body itself. In her article "Femmebodiment: Notes on queer feminine shapes of vulnerability," Ulrika Dahl focuses on the "affective intensity that vulnerability generates," writing, "Inspired by

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[5] The naming of the rubric *feminine* also presents another opportunity for critical discussions about writing and the nature of what writers write. It is possible that, when revisiting Blau DuPlessis within a contemporary framework, that what she is defining is not a rubric *feminine*, but instead a rubric femme. Contemporary understandings of femme identities lend themselves better to understanding the essay genre, feminine or femme, because of the relationship to the body. Karen L. Blair and Rhea Ashley Hoskins, in their analysis of contemporary understandings of femme identities, write, "In contrast to understanding femme as a feminine lesbian, Hoskin (2013) has defined femme as an identity that encapsulates femininity that is dislocated from, and not necessitating, a female body/identity, as well as femininity that is embodied by those whose femininity is deemed culturally unsanctioned" (101). By shifting the framework in which writers and scholars think about femininity in relation to the essay and the body, the conversation can and will become much more expansive and inclusive.

Lauren Berlant's contention that 'for femininity to be a genre like an aesthetic one means that it is a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances" (40). When writers, scholars – people in general – break the link connecting femininity to the body, this is when the rubric *feminine* has the potential to work because the rubric then becomes a methodology – like the essay does once writers establish the essay as a genre – for extracting knowledge from practice. Otherwise, if femininity is left so strongly connected to the body, Blau DuPlessis' argument for the rubric *feminine* falls apart when examined in a contemporary lens because of its ability to exclude people in ways that are dangerous and invalidating of their experiences and lives.

When Blau DuPlessis, Cixous, and Irigaray join in conversation with one another, the feminine attributes that these three theorists describe also make sense in light of how Miller describes genre as social action. For these theorists, the rubric *feminine* encompasses approaches that methodologically approach identity formation. They speak of exchanges and establishments, interactions that are built upon trading one thing for something else. They speak of desire and presence, of rejections and glimpses, of wayward thinking and practices. To connect the ideas of genre as social action and the essay as a feminine genre means to acknowledge that both entities – genre and the essay, that is – are active methodological processes by which meaning and knowledge are extracted and examined in light of practice.

The rubric *feminine* becomes an example of the ways in which gender is constructed, but also speaks to how genre is constructed as well. Since the criteria under the rubric *feminine* are active methods for constructing identity, we as writers can then compare and contrast the criteria by which society and culture understands femininity, but also how we understand the construction of identity as one way a text can construct a part of its identity, too. What is important to remember is that, since the criteria under the rubric *feminine* are active methods of identity formation, the rubric *feminine* is also a method. This set of criteria is not set in stone. Our social, cultural, and theoretical understandings of what constitutes femininity have changed over time as the needs of those who identify as feminine have changed. These changes also apply to how writers and scholars understand genre as evolving as the needs of its users change. Writers and scholars must also keep in mind that the fluidity of genre and gender also encourages Miller's ideas about genre as social action, that this fluidity enables people to extract knowledge from practice in a way that better helps them to understand how they construct their individual identities.

An important factor to take into consideration here is the historical moment from which Blau DuPlessis is writing. Her essay, first published in a special edition of *American Literature* in 1996, comes from a particular moment in the history of feminist studies where third wave feminism and "girl power" had taken hold[6]. Given the historical moment in which Blau DuPlessis wrote her article, it is important to remember not only the push against this idea of feminine identity *at that time* was an important part of feminism, but also how the idea of, in Blau DuPlessis' words, being "imprisoned under the rubric *feminine*" has changed in the twenty-five years since this piece was published.

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[6] It is also important to note that this was the same time when feminist geography had taken hold. The underlying connections between genre, gender, and space throughout this argument are ripe for another argument for another time, especially in light of Stuckey-French's history of the essay in relation to the domestic space during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see note 4).

Instead of thinking about the rubric *feminine* as something that directly imprisons or benefits those who claim feminine identities, Blau DuPlessis' argument can be thought of in a contemporary sense as a way of using the rubric *feminine* to think about how we understand the knowledge and practices of systems that were originally meant to imprison marginalized groups to the benefit of those in positions of power. How the rubric *feminine* achieves this is by giving writers a set of tools through which we can begin to work through those systems, either of writing or of power, to understand how they work, who built them, and what the nature of this imprisonment is.

This then leads writers to think about how the rubric *feminine* in a twenty-first century context employs the characteristics of the essay Blau DuPlessis talks about – interruption, distrust, the ability to begin over and over again – as tools to work through *how* femininity is imprisoned, *who* benefits, and *what* is disrupted. The rubric *feminine* is one way in which we as writers can analyze established systems of knowledge about writing itself – as well as femininity – and determine how the essay works and moves in ways that extract knowledge from practices, as Adorno mentions in his analysis of the essay, without having to define the subject before critiquing. Not defining the subject before critiquing disrupts predominant methods of knowledge creation, namely science, that insist upon naming a subject or a practice before extracting knowledge. The essay, since it is gendered as a feminine genre, disrupts predominant modes of thought like science because the essay works to extract knowledge from practice without necessarily having a name or terminology for the practice itself. For the essay and writers of essays, not being able to name a practice or to have answers to questions about the practice or knowledge writers extract from that practice is perfectly acceptable, which also disrupts the idea that knowledge creation is meant to provide people with answers to their questions.

In thinking about Blau DuPlessis' argument, the essay can be gendered as feminine because of *what* it disrupts and not necessarily that the essay, by nature does this work. "the reason is has been [sic] blinding to call a certain rhetoric *feminine*," writes Blau DuPlessis, "is that it seems to credit our gender (speaking as Herself) with a style disruptive of hegemony; yet it is not impossible that this radical style can be coupled with ancient, patriarchal gender tropes" (34, emphasis original). What is important to note here is Blau DuPlessis' emphasis on the possibility that this "rhetoric *feminine*" can be paired with patriarchal gender tropes to further reinforce gender binaries that are dangerous and exclusionary[7] for people whose identities are not included within the male-female gender binary. Thus, Blau DuPlessis writes, the only instances, in her opinion, where a gesture toward the feminine in discourse is of interest is when feminine rhetoric is combined with a feminist or liberatory project.

This is where I slightly disagree with Blau DuPlessis. In limiting the degree of interest invoked by a piece of writing to feminine rhetoric that aligns with feminist or liberatory critical projects, we are already beginning to exclude works that may fall under the category of the essay as a feminine genre but were written by writers who were not focused on feminist or liberatory subjects. This limitation also appears to suggest that the essay genre is *only* interesting when pursuing feminist or liberatory purposes when there are wildly interesting, inventive, and important essays that do not work toward either of these purposes. One example of such an essay is John McPhee's "The Search for Marvin Gardens," in which McPhee explores Atlantic City, the board game Monopoly, and his actual quest to find the real Marvin Gardens. Another example of such an essay could be T. Kira Madden's "The Greeter[8]," in which Madden chronicles a series of losses – a loss of innocence at the hands of an upperclassman, the loss of independence when her mother suddenly decides to pick her up from work, and the loss of her mother's brief sobriety, to name a few.

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[7] Blau DuPlessis writes, "To speak about the feminine as a new binary (though feminist) orthodoxy will evoke my heresy" (34-35).

Both of the essays I have mentioned, McPhee's and Madden's, work toward extracting some kind of knowledge from practice. McPhee works to understand the relationship between capitalism, geography, and the cultural icon that is the Monopoly board game. In her essay, Madden works through the loss of her father, who moved to New York for business reasons two years before the start of this piece, and how a series of subsequent losses changes the relationships she has with other people in the essay: her mother, her boss, the upperclassman who gives Madden rides to work at the mall in exchange for sexual favors. Neither McPhee's nor Madden's essays are feminist or liberatory projects, but are still wildly interesting and also work within the feminine framework of the essay genre by attempting to extract knowledge from practice.

Let's take stock of where this reimagining of the essay is so far before moving on to further analysis. Since the essay is a genre, we as writers can examine the parallels between rhetorical genre studies and theories of gender. Through this repositioned examination of the essay as a genre and the essay genre as being gendered feminine, writers can now begin to think about how and why the essay's social action functions in the way it does to extract knowledge from practice. Writers can also begin to see how the fluidity of the essay genre also mirrors Blau DuPlessis' idea of the rubric *feminine* by providing methods, such as interruption and disruption, that writers of essays can use however they see fit to achieve the goals of their particular project. What is important to remember, as I continue to work through the essay as a feminine genre, is that theories of genre and gender also provide tools to examine the history of the essay itself, dating back to Montaigne, as well as tools to revisit canonical texts within the essay genre.

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[8] I should also note that this essay appears in Madden's memoir-in-essays *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls*.

From a Beginning: Montaigne's Essays as a Feminine Genre

If we look at the essay genre from a historical standpoint[9], then Nancy Mairs argues in her work "Essaying the Feminine" that the essay has always been gendered feminine, as opposed to some genres gendered as masculine[10]. Mairs traces the feminine gendering of the essay genre back to Montaigne, whose essays were open and flexible enough to "enable the feminine inscription of human experience as no other does" (76) because Montainge's understanding of the essay genre did not reinforce patriarchal, heteronormative understandings of what writing should be[11] [12]. Montaigne's work, according to Mairs, embraced "relation over opposition, plurality over dichotomy, embodiment over cerebration: Montaigne's begins to sound like a feminist project" (75-76)[13]. Montaigne's approach to the essay acknowledges ideologies and states of being that existed outside of established norms of his time and that act enabled his work to affirm their presence[14].

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[9] Even though Montaigne is often credited with naming what we understand as the essay, the genre itself has historical roots in many different cultural traditions both within and outside of Europe. John D'Agata presents some of these possibilities in his anthology *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, in which he also presents texts as essays from as far back as ancient Sumer, but also includes texts presented as essays from South Africa, ancient Greece, China, and Japan, all of which predate Montaigne.

[10] Although Mairs argues that the novel as a genre is gendered as masculine, Mairs does not give a clear reason as to why she contextualizes the novel in such a way. It could be that we see the novel as a genre that is able to be defined with a particular set of characteristics that make a novel a novel. Novels have a particular structure and fit into a particular category of texts that is widely recognized and understood. Conversely, the nature of the essay genre does not allow for this structure and order, and while falling into the gender binary is dangerous and counterintuitive to the theoretical framework of this paper, the essay's opposition to what defines the novel could be what sets up this gendered contrast in genre.

Mairs' observations of Montaigne's approaches also align with Blau DuPlessis' thoughts on disrupting hegemony. As mentioned earlier, Blau DuPlessis writes, "the reason is has been [sic] blinding to call a certain rhetoric *feminine* is that it seems to credit our gender (speaking as Herself) with a style disruptive of hegemony; yet it is not impossible that this radical style can be coupled with ancient, patriarchal gender tropes"

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[11] This is where definitions of the essay genre become important. According to Mairs, the definition of the essay Montaigne worked with and the ways in which we define the essay genre now have changed drastically (76).

[12] Montaigne's rejection of these ideas could be, in part, because Montaigne found this approach to thinking difficult. Montaigne did not accept the philosophical and theological practices of his time that ignored the notion that men had an embodied state that was valuable to explore and document in addition to the inner workings of the mind (John O'Neil qtd. in Mairs 75).

[13] It is important to note that Mairs asserts that simply having a project that sounds like a feminist project does not make Montaigne himself a feminist (76).

[14] Of this, Mairs writes, "Language may not be imagined as a series of acts, both generous and generative, which do not mourn absence but affirm presence: word as glance, as sigh, as caress" (84). The essay genre is the focus of a complex conversation that examines the role of the form in relation to the self. Adorno argues that the essay is a method of self-affirmation, writing that "in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed and affirmed" (1958). Didion in her essay "On Keeping a Notebook" imagines the essay as an agent of self-effacement, arguing, "We are brought up in the ethic that others, any others, all others, are by definition more interesting than ourselves; taught to be different, just this side of self-effacing" (para. 10). Others, such as Gornick, argue for self-discovery and self-definition (14),

(34, emphasis original). In Montaigne's work, through the act of embracing relation, plurality, and embodiment, Montaigne's methods at work within his essays disrupt systems of knowing and knowledge that reinforce systems of patriarchy; instead of there being *one* way of approaching a subject matter, Montaigne's methods – or the essay genre's social action, to apply Miller's terminology to Montaigne's work centuries after he wrote – emphasized that there are multiple ways in which knowledge can be extracted from any number of practices. Additionally, Montaigne's methods also align with Blau DuPlessis' rubric *feminine* in that his approaches to the subjects about which Montaigne wrote embrace fluidity, multiplicity, and the ability to begin again and again. This means that, instead of Montaigne looking for one specific piece of knowledge that will definitively answer his question, he is able to write using a methodology that encourages and affirms multiple approaches and multiple answers to the same question, including answers that are not answers but instead ask more questions.

I see this acknowledgement of ideologies and states of being outside of the norms of his time in the approaches Montaigne admits he prefers versus the predominating methods of analysis of his time, mainly philosophy and theology. In his essay "On the education of children," Montaigne writes, "History is more my quarry, or poetry, which I love with particular affection. For as Cleanthes said, just as sound, when pent up in the narrow channel of a trumpet, comes out sharper and stronger" (107). Montaigne prefers history and poetry as methods of analysis because history and poetry use real historical figures to illustrate his theories and thoughts. As Mairs argues, Montaigne is then able to affirm ideas and states of being by establishing historical trends or traditions that serve as the basis of his thoughts.

In later essays, Montaigne critiques theology and philosophy, the predominant modes of inquiry used by his contemporaries, in a variety of contexts. This includes the sentiment in Montaigne's essay "Of cripples," where he expresses that philosophers take the easy way out in coming to some of their conclusions. Montaigne writes here, after discussing Plato and Antisthenes, "It is much easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other. It is the old saying: The pot calls the kettle black" (685). It seems that Montaigne's issue with philosophers is that they are too quick to place accuse or place blame on others before looking to themselves for fault in their ideas and theories.

Because of his attitudes toward philosophers, Montaigne also disrupts knowledge by working to undermine the work philosophers do. By saying that "it is much easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other," Montaigne invites readers to think that philosophy might be taking an approach to extracting knowledge from practice that not only limits the kinds of knowledge philosophers gather, but also limits how people think about the validity of those practices. By affirming that there are multiple valid ways through which people can extract knowledge from practice, Montaigne's essays not only speak to Miller's ideas of genre as social action centuries before Miller wrote her article, but Montaigne's essays also demonstrate how the essay genre is gendered feminine using the same concepts behind Blau DuPlessis' rubric *feminine* – meaning that there are many different ways through which a person can understand and claim a feminine identity.

The structure of Montaigne's essays supports Mairs' idea that the essay genre, as envisioned by Montaigne, is feminine. Many of Montaigne's essays do not take up a lot of space on the page. In Donald M. Frame's translation of Montaigne's essays, many of the essays range from a couple of paragraphs to a few pages, taking up very little space in relation to what Mairs argues is the masculine genre of the novel, a form that often has hundreds of pages and takes up space not only in its physicality, but also in the material resources used to produce the novel as an object.

Space is an interesting aspect of the essay genre to consider in relation to the essay as a feminine genre. People who claim feminine identities are often encouraged to take up less space, something that is very apparent in many cultures. Whether it's through weight loss and dieting, foot binding, or the volume of their voices, people who claim feminine identities are offered, encouraged, and sometimes forced to take part in changes to their bodies or their lives so that they take up less space. Even though the essay as a genre has a different relation to space (in particular, see note 4,) the amount of space Montaigne's essays take up or do not take up also enable his work to exercise its feminine attributes that are a part of the essay genre. In keeping his essays brief and focused, Montaigne's essays show their femininity through their ability to begin again and again, to use Blau DuPlessis' terms. Their brevity allows for Montaigne to continue writing in a similar vein – on the education of children, on cripples, on cannibals, on thumbs, etc. – without repeating himself because Montaigne can use a different method to extract knowledge from the same practice, thus creating opportunities for new essays that write through, around, about, or towards his subject matter. Once again, this is also a way that Montaigne disrupts knowledge with the use of the essay as a feminine genre. By creating opportunities for multiple kinds of knowledge to be drawn from a particular practice, Montaigne's essays and the methods used to write them also demonstrate that there is space – on the page, socially, and culturally – for multiple truths and understandings of the same practice.

It is also important to note that the structure of the essay genre is often fragmented in ways that reflect the fragmented nature of reality. Many contemporary essays, as opposed to those written by Montaigne during his lifetime, are composed of pieces of multiple narratives fitted together to examine a larger issue of which the writer's personal experiences are a part. Ali argues that, at least in a contemporary sense in comparison to Montaigne, this is a phenomenon of the American essay, writing, "It may be that an American writer has the need – no question of desire – to write into these vexed spaces with the only techniques available: a fragmentation of narrative and multiplicity of lyric selves" (35). Ali's statement is not necessarily unique to American writers of the essay. Within a global perspective, many of the early essays in John D'Agata's anthology *The Lost Origins of the Essay* rely on fragmentation for a variety of reasons, ranging from writing style to the fact that parts of these texts may have simply been lost to history.

Thomas King, in his book *The Truth about Stories*, repeats the same origin story at the beginning of each chapter but with slight variation, reinforcing Ali's idea of a multiplicity of lyric selves from the perspective of Native American storytelling. On the idea of stories and the self, King writes, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are. 'You can't understand the world without telling a story,' the Anishinabe writer Gerald Vizenor tells us. 'There isn't any center to the world but a story'" (32). Having a multiplicity of selves – and therefore a multiplicity of stories – helps people, or in this case writers, better understand the world around them and their ability to extract multiple kinds of knowledge from the same practice, or to even see how practices can be related in ways that help writers understand the knowledge they extract from such practices.

This fragmentation of reality also reflects how we conceptualize femininity, especially when considering Blau DuPlessis' definition of the essay and the feminine genre as one that begins again and again (34). In this case, fragmented essays begin again and again, starting once more with each piece of the overall narrative the writer chooses to pick up. In his essays, Montaigne does not necessarily approach fragmentation as a structural device, but instead approaches fragmentation as a method through which Montaigne can gather seemingly disparate pieces of stories as a way to support or illuminate the thoughts he works through in his essays. These fragments might be pieces of historical accounts, such as quotes from Cleanthes in his essay "Of the education of children," the story of Niobe in "Of sadness," or a collection of ancient opinions on death in "To flee from sensual pleasures at the price of life." In gathering these fragments of various narratives and selves, Montaigne's approach to the essay reflects the work of Blau DuPlessis' rubric *feminine*. Just as Blau DuPlessis's rubric *feminine* includes and supports various criteria for understanding the essay genre's femininity, Montaigne's essays provide various ways for him and his audiences to work through the act of extracting knowledge from practice in a way that disrupts the hegemonic ideas and practices of his time.

When writers revisit Montaigne's essays through the lens of Blau DuPlessis' rubric *feminine*, we can then see how the essay genre as Montaigne understood essays to work also serves as a methodology. Through this approach, Montaigne and his essays resisted the predominant modes of thinking of his time, philosophy and theology, to pursue other ways to extract knowledge from practice. Because Montaigne preferred disciplines other than philosophy and theology, Montaigne's essays were able to disrupt knowledge of the time by creating space for other disciplines and methods of inquiry, which then allowed him as a writer to become a part of a what writers now consider a long tradition of essayists who have, as we have found in more recent times, embraced methods of extracting knowledge from practice in a way that embraces fluidity, disruption of knowledge, and fragmentations as ways in which writers can extract knowledge and create a sense of understanding, even if that understanding means admitting what it is we don't know.

Disrupting Practice and Knowledge: Jenny Boully's The Body: An Essay

Jenny Boully's *The Body: An Essay* is a more contemporary example of how the essay genre is gendered as feminine, but also employs the interruption and disruption that Blau DuPlessis argues is an important feature of the essay itself. *The Body: An Essay* meditates on connection, particularly the absence or loss of connections that may or may not be loving relationships. The ambiguity of Boully's essay allows for a kind of fluidity that invites the reader to not only question what this essay *is* but also what this essay *does* and asks readers to do. When *The Body: An Essay* was first published, and as is mentioned in the essay's cover synopsis, critics and other writers saw *The Body: An Essay* as a challenge to our understanding of how prose works. The danger of this fluidity and invitation to readers asking them to consider the ways in which we are taught how prose works, however, is that this large amount of fluidity may also cause confusion. In a February 2022 post on Twitter, Boully recounts one such response she received while sending *The Body: An Essay* out for publication. Boully writes, "When I was sending out excerpts of The Body [sic,] one editor, who is a famous writer, wrote on the rejection slip, 'I don't even know what this is.' I saved that rejection like a love letter" (@JennyBoully). The editor/famous writer Boully references in her post might actually be onto something, but I will get to that in a moment.

One noticeable feature of Boully's work is that this essay is missing an important part of any kind of essay – the body of the text itself. *The Body: An Essay* is composed entirely of footnotes attached to a text that is absent from Boully's work; in fact, Boully's work is only located in these footnotes. Boully's use of footnotes resists the idea that prose of any kind, fiction or nonfiction, has to be written in paragraphs and the body of the work has to appear at the center of the page, while footnotes are meant to supplement and further shape the work to which they are attached. The structure of *The Body: An Essay* acts as a disruption to the ways in which writers and readers understand prose writing to work, meaning that the essential parts of the story or essay are contained within a body of text that takes of the majority of the page.

Boully's use of footnotes and only footnotes in her essay does some really interesting things when looking not only about how Blau DuPlessis, Adorno, and writer Paul Lisicky have all looked at the essay, gendered as feminine, can also be a destabilizing methodology. To start working through these writer's thoughts and connecting them to *The Body: An Essay*, Blau DuPlessis writes, "Given that the essay is all margin, marginalia, interstitial writing, it rearranges, compounds, enfolds, and erodes the notion of center in textually fruitful ways" (Blau DuPlessis 20). In the case of Boully's work, *The Body: An Essay* is not only literally all marginalia because it is only written in footnotes, but the use of footnotes, of marginalia, erodes the center of this particular text into nonexistence[15]. The existence of a physical center of the text itself enables Boully herself and her readers to shift focus and reconsider what knowledge Boully is extracting from the experiences she recounts in *The Body: An Essay*.

Adorno's thoughts on the essay also support Boully's methodology in *The Body: An Essay*. Of the essay genre itself, Adorno writes:

> On the whole it [the essay] could be interpreted as a protest against the four rules that Descartes' *Discourse on Method* sets up at the beginning of modern Western science and its theory. The second of these rules, the decomposition of the object into 'as many parts as possible and as might be necessary for its adequate solution,' formulates that analysis of elements under whose sign traditional theory equates a conceptual order with the structure of being. But the object of the essay, the artifact, refuses any analysis of its elements and can only be constructed from its specific idea. (161-162)

Essentially, what Adorno is describing here is the essay's ability to break its subject matter down into as many parts as needed in order to work through its subject matter. This process of the essay not only reflects how a rubric generally works, but also reflects the rubric *feminine* by encouraging and supporting many approaches to achieve whatever it is that the rubric is measuring: femininity, knowledge, etc. When using Adorno's thoughts to approach Jenny Boully's work, though, breaking down its subject matter into as many parts as necessary provides justification for Boully's methodology and provides a way to structure all the pieces. On the other hand, however, Boully may have also taken to breaking her subject down into too many pieces, prompting the note from the confused writer/editor about not knowing what *The Body: An Essay* is supposed to be. What Adorno doesn't discuss – but Paul Lisicky does in David Lazar's anthology *Truth in Nonfiction* – is the possibility of taking the breaking down of a subject too far, to the point where writers invite the opportunity for self-erasure (Lisicky 2). I suspect that, in *The Body: An Essay*, Boully may have taken her methodology one step too far and, as a result, may have begun to erase the subject of her essay, which could also be an intentional testing of the limits of the essay genre.

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[15] The erosion of the center in Boully's essay also supports what I have previously discussed in relation to the work of Dahl and Blair and Hoskin when looking at identity and the body (see note 5). By eroding the center, which in the case of *The Body: An Essay* would be the body of the text itself, to the point to where the center no longer exists, Boully is then able to use the essay's feminine methodology to the fullest extent because, at this point, Boully as a writer (and, by extension, her readers) can no longer rely on a body to characterize an understanding of femininity because the body no longer exists. Constructing *The Body: An Essay* in this way also enables writers to continue thinking about the role that queerness plays in how writers understand the essay genre.

Boully's choice in only using footnotes may push the limits of the essay genre, but also works to tie back to the essay genre's feminine gender. As Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa," "A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way" (888). In light of Cixous' comments, we can think of Boully's *The Body: An Essay* as causing an upheaval that is meant to break up the truths writers understand about writing. Therefore, the structure of Boully's essay not only interrupts a particular kind of knowledge about writing, but draws on a particular methodology that Boully uses for extracting knowledge from a particular practice – in this case, the use of footnotes. This methodology also directly speaks to Miller's idea of genre as social action because Boully has created a methodology by which she is extracting knowledge from practice – that practice being her own experiences – but does so in a way that disrupts the reader's knowledge and assumptions as to how that methodology should work. For Boully, resisting the knowledge that governs prose texts means placing value on the footnotes themselves. For this resistance to work, Boully's essay could not have a text as we typically understand an essay to have and still be able to resist the power structures that tell us paragraphs and traditionally formatted prose are the "proper" ways to write.

The point Boully makes in only using footnotes is that the power structures governing the relationship between a text and its paratextual material casts these materials as being lesser than or not as important as the text itself. The power structures I speak of are rooted in how we read a text with footnotes; when readers see footnotes, they send a signal to the reader that this information is important but is in some way not as important as the body of the text that has not been almost cast to the margins. The visual cues associated with footnotes' placement on the page lets the reader know that the writer sees this information as important enough to be a part of the text as a whole, but not important enough to exist *as part of* the text's body – similar to how we think of femininity to be divorced from the body but is still an important part of a person's identity. Boully writes, "Given this information, the definition of 'footnote' is of particular interest to the overall understanding of 'bedlam.' Consider, for instance, this definition: n.2. *Something related to but of lesser importance than a larger work or occurrence*" (4 n.9). By divorcing the footnotes from the body of her essay, Boully creates a bit of bedlam for her readers. How are we supposed to understand the footnotes without the body of the essay? How are we supposed to understand femininity without the body itself?

In this same vein, Boully's use of footnotes set a stage that enables her as the writer to employ what Blau DuPlessis argues makes the feminine form of the essay genre interesting. Boully does this by creating connections between her creative work and theories about the representability of women's experiences through language. Boully writes, "The essence behind the curtain, i.e. the stage, is composed of the yearning to determine what may be seen and what will remain unseen. This should be understood in the definition of 'staging'" (70 n.156). To borrow Boully's language, the footnotes of a traditionally structured prose text exist behind the stage, meaning that they are not the central focus of the performance enacted by the text itself. The stage of the text, because of our western reading practices, is what draws our attention to the text and places the footnotes at the bottom of the page, often unseen or ignored unless a reader chooses to seek out that information. Boully structures her text in such a way that draws attention to what often remains unseen and gives the footnotes a space of their own to exist outside the space of the text in a way that is just as valid as the text that would have existed in the body of the essay, if the essay had such a body.

What further reinforces the essayistic methodology of Boully's writing is the possibility of failure stemming from its resistance to what we see as traditional structures. Resistance is a key part of Boully's essay; by resisting the space of the text as westernized readers are trained to read, Boully deliberately writes and speaks from the margins of the page as part of making her statement. But, Judith Butler argues, there is a risk here and with resistance in general. Butler writes, "That *resistance* is here linked only with the possibility of *failure* will be shown as the political inadequacy of this conception of the law, for the formulation suggests that the law, the injunction, that produces this failure cannot itself be reworked or recalled by virtue of the kind of resistances that it generates" (68, emphasis original). According to Butler, societies and cultures have built the idea of failure into systems that govern how people live and move through their world, but the concept of failure being so closely tied to resistance highlights the inadequacy of the laws people have created.

To connect this to Boully's work, to see *The Body: An Essay* as a failure because of a reader's inability to understand the resistance that this text has to the ways in which prose writers are taught how to write prose is faulty on more than one account. This approach to failure suggests, first of all, that there is only one way to write a prose text. As I have argued, the essay by definition resists having one predominant methodology writers use to write essays. Because the essay exists as a feminine genre, the rubric by which the essay constructs its femininity allows for, encourages, and almost requires multiple approaches or methodologies to exist in the same space in order to achieve the kind of social action that makes the essay a genre as opposed to a form. What might be seen as a failure by readers, including the writer/editor Boully referenced in her twitter post as not knowing what *The Body: An Essay* was supposed to be, is actually Boully's implementation of the methodologies of the essay genre, such as fragmentation, to test the limits of those methodologies. Boully, through this particular essay, asks us to question if we are able to extract knowledge from practice if there are pages of the essay with nothing except page numbers (16, 56) or if there are footnotes without any text associated with them (49, n.107). In the case of Boully's work, the possibility of failure Butler speaks to is the failure of creating an essay that emphasizes both its artistic and methodological nature grounded in feminine thinking that readers recognize as an essay, as a piece of art, or as an example of knowledge formation.

Additionally, Boully's essay challenges the notion that writers write about their subject matter. This is where the creative nonfiction as a meta-genre also comes back into my argument. As Mary Cappello mentions, creative nonfiction knows the power of prepositions; instead of writing about its subject matter, creative nonfiction writes from, nearby, toward, under, around, or through what is at the center the writing itself (Cappello qtd. in Rendle-Short et al 186). When thinking as Cappello does and also taking into account Adorno's thoughts on Descartes and the deterioration of the center, Boully's work is not a failure but is instead prompts a question with an invitation to resistance. What happens when writers get so close to the center of their writing, to the object of the preposition, that the center or object dissolves? Becomes unrecognizable? Is it possible to have a prose text with no center and still be able to do the social action work that the essay genre asks writers to do?

Even though Boully's *The Body: An Essay* is now seen as a canonical essay, it is still worth revisiting so that writers have an example of a work that still asks questions of how writers write prose. These questions invite writers to think about what the essay genre's methodology approaches as a center, as an object of a preposition, and how the essay's feminine gendering encourages a resistance to the laws or conventions that govern prose writing. Not only do these questions rooted in resistance ask writers to reconsider how they understand prose writing, but these questions also ask writers to consider – and remember – one of the notions about knowledge extraction in the first place: that the essay's methods, as opposed to scientific methodologies, does not need to name its subject matter before understanding it. For the essay, particularly Boully's essay, it is entirely within the realm of possibility to extract knowledge from practice without first having to name that practice – or, as seen in *The Body: An Essay*, to have the language to describe that practice in the first place.

Conclusion

In my view, when we as writers and scholars rethink genre from a cross-disciplinary perspective, genre can present a range of opportunities for writers. This shift in attitudes and approaches – from looking at genre from a literary studies perspective to a rhetorical genre studies point of view, as well as reexamining a taxonomy of genre – also allows us to understand how genre changes in relation to how we can extract knowledge from practices that we ourselves experience or that we observe others using in their lives. The same can be said for gender. When thinking of gender as being performed and dynamic instead of fixed and bounded by rules and conventions, writers can create and enter spaces that allow them to think, weigh, test, or try what they have experienced or observed in others as a way of extracting knowledge using methods that resist the impulse to define their subject matter before understanding a practice.

Additionally, this shift in thinking and approach towards genre also allows us to think about how genre and gender challenge notions of how knowledge is gained and formed. Because the essay genre largely defies not only scientific methodology but also resists a definition rooted in formal characteristics, thinking of genre as social action also allows us to view the essay for what it *does* instead of what it *is*. By approaching genre for what it does, we can not only begin to think about how texts and individuals, as well as how knowledge and practices, are related, but also begin to consider new ways in which we understand how texts work at multiple levels: at the level of the individual text itself, but also at the level of genre. In shifting our perspectives and understandings regarding the essay, genre, and gender, we as creative writers can also add to the current conversations within the field about inclusivity and accessibility by not only examining the institutional structures that surround our writing, but also look at the writing itself. By expanding our understanding of the relationship between genre and gender, the understanding of genre as social action, we as writers can work to redefine what it means to tell the stories of our lives and of the lives of other people, even if that means acknowledging that these redefining conversations include changing the ways in which we think about writing itself.

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Sifting the Feminine Bones:
Essays

Belly Rubs

Before I get in the shower, I stand in front of the mirror, mostly naked except for an undergarment or two. I look at myself facing the shower, then facing the opposite wall, then head-on. I'm looking for changes that, almost every morning, are so miniscule that sometimes I can't tell they happened. The morning after I've ordered a pizza for dinner or when I'm retaining water, I look at myself from different angles. I see the difference and sigh. There are mornings when the number on the bathroom scale warns me about the changing shape in the mirror, but there are mornings when it catches me completely off guard.

The thing I'm looking at in the mirror is my stomach. My belly. Or, as others have referred to it in a disparaging and misunderstood way, my gut. When I hear those descriptions, I instinctively flinch.

When my self-esteem and self-image are particularly shaken, I spend longer than I should in the mirror. I examine myself standing with my usual posture. Left angle, right angle, front view. Then the what-if contortions begin. I roll my shoulders back and lift my chest, invoking the proper posture I learned from years of band and choir practice. I ask myself – what would I look like if there was simply less?

I draw in a deep breath of air and hold it in my lungs. My abdominal muscles tighten, and I see my stomach change shape. It takes up less space in front of me. My skin wrinkles in reprieve. I exhale and wonder.

*

My dad has said on more than one occasion, "You were a cute little kid until someone taught you how to read. Then you sat down and got fat." When I was younger, his comment was enough to send me into tears. I fled to my bedroom to cry it out alone because I didn't want to hear his lecture on crying. If he was trying to instill some sense of fortitude in me, his methods didn't work.

As I got older, his refrains provoked less and less of a reaction from me until, somewhere along the transition from my teenage years and into adulthood, my response brought about fewer tears and more internal dialogue about his character. Occasionally, I'd question why my dad acted this way and the fathers of my peers did not say these things about them.

It's a miracle that I'm a writer, since, for as long as I can remember, my body shape has been, in some way, associated with my literacy. The connection between something that I have a rather turbulent relationship with, my body, and something that brings me so much joy, reading and writing, doesn't make sense. Maybe it's because I've sought refuge in my literacy, in reading and writing, because they don't have to rely on the shape of my body.

*

When we talk about silencing and shaming, I think of all the times I've gone to a doctor for something wrong with me and the conversation turned from my ailment to my weight. "Well, if you just lost some of the weight, then the problem should resolve itself," they'd say. It didn't matter if the ailment was a persistent cough or my allergies had worsened, if my knee hurting or I'd fallen and scraped my leg badly enough that I wanted to avoid the wound getting infected. Part of the prescribed cure was the same: lose some weight and it'll clear up.

On one occasion, I sat on the examining table in a room at my then-university's student health center. I had a skin blemish that had gotten out of control quickly. When I tried to pop it, the spot popped inward and not outward, resulting in a purple-ish lump about three inches long cradling the crook of my neck.

The doctor, an older woman with an accent, walked in. If she knew my name or why I was there, it was only based on my paperwork. She never asked my name or how I was doing. All I wanted was some antibiotics and to be sent home.

The doctor looked at me once, twice, as she sat down on the stool in front of the examining room computer. "You have to be sick. You can't weigh that much and not be sick."

"But my neck –"

"I'm going to order bloodwork. I'm referring you to an endocrinologist. You need to get this under control. That's probably why you have that lump on your neck," she said, her sentences bleeding together in a flurry. She paused. "What do you do here?"

"What do I do? I'm a graduate student. I teach English."

"You'll also need a tuberculosis test since you work with children." I protested, saying that I taught at the university – college students, not children – and that I wasn't required to have a TB test on file.

"No, if you teach, you must have a negative TB test on file. That is the law," she said. It wasn't the law.

The doctor took me by the arm and partially dragged me to the lab, where a technician drew my blood and ran the ordered the fasting blood sugar test. Bloodwork like this was not in the original plan. In fact, I had eaten lunch within the last hour. A banana, a bagel with cream cheese, and a venti no whip white chocolate mocha, all from the campus Starbucks. I'd run out of time to pack a better-for-me lunch that morning. I knew what the results were going to be. High and inaccurate.

After they took my blood, the doctor handed me a prescription for the antibiotics that I wanted to clear up my neck. I hadn't been able to teach, or really go anywhere outside of my apartment, without wearing a scarf for the past week. I had a first date with a guy I really liked in a few days. This lump had to disappear.

"This is for that spot on your neck. I'll call you when I get the results of your bloodwork in. Come back tomorrow to check the TB test."

The student health center called a few hours later, just as I was about to head into class, to tell me that the results of my bloodwork were available on my online patient portal. During the break in my class, I looked at the report. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

The next day, when I made a trip to campus just to have the TB test read while I explained to the nurse what happened – and watched the nurse roll her eyes as I told my story – the doctor popped her head in. "I have the results of your blood work. Your blood sugar is really high, but everything else looks oddly normal. I've sent the referral to the endocrinologist. Please answer when their office calls you," she said curtly before moving on to her next patient.

The endocrinologist called once while I was teaching and then never called again.

*

The average human stomach organ is about 12 inches across and measures approximately six inches from top to bottom. The stomach organ, however, can stretch and changing shape drastically depending on how much food a person has eaten.

I wonder about my stomach, both the bodily region and the organ itself. Despite its size, my stomach is pretty firm until about my belly button, where firmness quickly transitions into squishiness. But, after I eat, I can sometimes see what I think is my stomach organ faintly changing the landscape of my skin. Too much food or too much to drink creates a mound that I can feel when I try to smooth it over. If I put a hand on either side, I feel the change in elevation between the valleys of my palms. Throughout the day, the whole region of my stomach changes shape, not only stretching outward but also gaining in elevation, the slope from my breast to navel changing from a deflated descent to something looking like the capital letter "c."

Even as an adult, the older of my two younger sisters sometimes pokes my stomach. "Why is your belly so hard?" she asks after the poke.

I wonder that myself because I know that I don't have a set of six-pack abs trying to crawl their way to the surface. "I don't know," I say. "Maybe I just have really superficial organs." I don't know if that's actually true or if it's something that I made up on the fly because, in my mind, it made sense based on what I've observed about my body.

"Nah. I just think you're fat."

She's never been one to mince her words.

*

Sometimes, as I read books by women who discuss their bodies, my chest tightens. This time, it’s not anxiety or dread that catches my breath in a pause, but instead the pause is brought on by wonder.

I marvel at their abilities to not only process the forms their bodies take, both the ones that help them move through the world and how they translate experiences onto the page. My breath catches when I read these words that describe how bodies are celebrated, are marked, are scorned. But yet, even with the emotions that run through the words and paragraphs that I hold in my mind, I find myself pulling my own body closer, unsure if I am ready to release it into this world. I am afraid that, if I share what I have been through, then I am also opening myself up to the opportunity to be judged, to be marked, to be scorned more so than I already have been.

After living for so long in a way that the shape of my body has been described to me by other people, often in a way that is cruel and unforgiving and passes judgement on my body and the self that animates it, turning my body into words and encouraging it to dissolve at its edges in a new and different way is a task that tempts terror.

*

The side-by-side pictures of five pounds of muscle and five pounds of fat, reminiscent of the pictures in textbooks for health classes, make me wonder. Just how many inches around my middle are pounds of muscle, and how many are pounds of fat? How important is composition, is shape, is structure, if my first impulse is to critique because it is a part of me?

*

Another fat discussion with, this time, both of my younger sisters. “We were watching TV and learned that there’s two kinds of fat in your body,” one of them says.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. The normal kind of fat is squishy. If your fat is hard, that means you’re sick,” says the older of my two younger sisters, the same one who occasionally would poke my stomach. She pokes my stomach once again. “You have hard fat in your belly. That means you’re sick.” She speaks with a child-like matter-of-factness that does not reflect her age. I’ve never verified what they saw on TV. For all I know, they could be right or they could be terribly wrong.

If only she had known.

*

Teenage years. My twenties. My dad: “You know, you’re going to need to work on losing some weight if you want to think about getting a date or a boyfriend any time soon. Guys won’t want to date you with a gut like that.” A statement made even though I was dating someone.

One time, I asked my mom about why he made such comments. Did he realize that those comments hurt? Forget about niceties because, in all honesty, my concern about my father’s social graces faded a long time ago after realizing that he genuinely did not care about being social or the graces that accompany being in groups of people. “He’s been like that as long as I’ve known him,” my mom said with a sigh. She told how my father and his brothers would make fun of my aunts at family dinners she went to when my parents were dating, commenting on what and how much they ate and the makeup they wore. “They were downright cruel sometimes,” my mom added at the end of the story.

I’ve always wondered if my mom ever saw the parallels, even if my father was careful to make his comments when she was out of earshot or not at home. I hoped that she saw them and that maybe, just maybe, it was my mom’s inherited and chronic aversion to confrontation that prevented her from saying anything, no matter how badly I wanted her to stand up for me.

*

It’s not like I haven’t tried to make it, my stomach my belly my gut, go away, or at the very least, take up less space. I’ve tried plenty of interventions, some healthier than others. Sometime in junior high, my pediatrician prescribed me Glucophage and then Metformin that was supposed to help. Both drugs are typically prescribed to control a person’s blood sugar and are usually prescribed to people with diabetes. My pediatrician sent me to a dietician. I lost some weight, but not enough and not quickly enough to satisfy my doctor.

Between marching band and playing sports in high school, I lost more weight, but I didn’t make enough progress quickly enough to please anyone. My doctor upped the dosage from one 500 mg pill a day to one pill twice a day to two pills twice a day. Progress, but still not enough.

I started denying myself food the summer between freshman and sophomore years of high school. By the time my senior year of high school came around, I spent almost as much time leading my marching band squad from the aluminum bench on the sidelines as I did on the field. I kept feeling faint, even as summer cooled off and turned to fall. “Maybe we should try cutting back on how much she’s taking every day,” my mom suggested to the nurse at my doctor’s office. My mom didn’t know what I was doing.

The doctor called back and said to cut back to three pills a day, two in the morning and one at night.

When I had a license and a paycheck, I started trying out different weight-loss supplements. I was still not allowing myself to eat what I should but was getting better at acknowledging that my body needed something to keep it alive. I still lost weight, but not in the way my doctor or I wanted. I hid the bottles of pills under the clothes in one of my dresser drawers because I was the only one who would look there. First apple cider vinegar pills. Then diet pills I didn’t have enough discipline to keep up with. To be honest, I don’t remember if I even broke the seal on the bottle of diet pills before they expired. Part of me was too scared to open it to begin with.

Why are you doing this? my boyfriend asked.

I had more than enough answers.

I wanted to be pretty I wanted to not be a failure I wanted to be happy I wanted to be successful I wanted to not be judged anymore. Stop, take a breath. I wanted to be better.

Better is such a loaded word, I think now, a decade and a half, almost two decades, later.

But I love you the way you are, he responded.

I wasn’t at issue with his love for me. I was up against the lack of love I was taught I should have for the body I found myself in.

*

I remind myself that not everything about a stomach, my stomach, is bad or solely worthy of critique. After all, this is the part of me that breaks down food and gives me energy to stay alive. This is the part of me that, as long as it is warm, keeps me comfortable even when the air outside has chilled.

I remind myself that arms and bodies are what link together in hugs, of the warmth I feel in that brief moment of embrace. This is the part of me that gurgles and rumbles and expands and contracts, all the sounds and movements that remind me that, despite what may be or have once been in my head, part of me continues to carry on. I have more than one place in the body where a force of life resides.

I remind myself that my stomach, the region, is the center, the center of gravity, the center of the body, one of the points around which the rest of my physical form takes shape. This is the center around which I can curl myself when I need to compress because the world feels too big. This is the center that allows me to expand, to take up space, to stretch and reach and extend. This is the center that enables the edges of myself to dissolve and reassemble around a core, always finding their way back.

I remind myself.

I remind myself. I remind myself. I remind myself.

*

I stumble across a conversation on Twitter that, if I hadn't been sitting in my desk chair in my apartment, would've stopped me in my tracks.

The thread, tagged #PCOS, was a conversation among women who have the same disease I do, polycystic ovary syndrome. It's a disease that wreaks havoc on the female body because, when your hormones are out of balance, everything else is out of whack, too. Because PCOS can be an underlying cause of so many other medical conditions – including disordered eating – the data can only estimate just how many women this disease impacts. One thing it does is change the ways I look at every part of my body.

And here, on the screen in front of me, women are sharing their stories of how PCOS changes the ways their stomachs look. Some women speak of their bellies, people assuming that these women were several months pregnant when in fact, hormonal shifts, cysts, and bloating make their stomachs take up more space. "If only they knew how many times I've miscarried," one woman added to the end of her post.

Others talk about the struggle of finding clothes that fit and conceal their midsections. Some mentioned that they have the same pairs of pants in different sizes so that they have clothes to wear with the changing shape of their bodies. A pair for good days and a pair for bad days. I have those pants, the ones that have stretched themselves out over time. They don't make me feel so constricted and self-conscious when my body wants to do nothing more than expand and hurt. I don't remember other women mentioning the pain, but it comes and goes. I have shirts to go with those pants, too. The shirts that cover, that conceal, that don't get too close to my skin for days when nothing seems to fit or feel quite right. Even when they've sat in the closet for so long that I can't remember when I last wore that piece of clothing in that size, I don't let myself give them away. Keep them, I tell myself. Just in case.

I read the thread despite a tightness at the back of my throat. I marvel at the bravery these women have to put their stories on display, to try to create a new narrative out of the ones that other people have imposed upon their bodies that do not or cannot operate within the confines of social acceptance.

I read about attacks on women's characters. Messy, sloppy. Slovenly. Disrespectful to others, to their spouses, to themselves.

Assumptions about their professional lives, their personal lives, their intelligence – or lack thereof. Misgendering because of their size. Questions about their ability to move through tight spaces.

The comments. The whispers. The stares and glares and sideways glances that come with the territory, the territory of taking up more space than other people say they should.

I know how they feel. I dread one moment at the beginning of each semester of teaching, the moment when I must make a split-second decision as to how I'm going to move about my classroom for the next fifteen weeks.

I know how they feel. Sometimes, it's exhausting to get dressed in the morning, making sure that everything coordinates to show the world that you do, in fact, know how to take care of yourself, of your body that doesn't want to follow someone else's rules.

I know how they feel. I understand what it's like to hear the whispered comments, to see the sideways glances when in the dressing room at a store and you look at yourself in the mirror while wearing something that reveals the body underneath the fabric. It makes some people uncomfortable. A well-meaning friend once asked me a question over lunch one time after I told her about another job interview that resulted in a thanks, but no thanks follow up. "Are you sure it isn't the way you look?" she asked.

If I had known then what I know now about my body, I probably would have had an answer. I might have said that there are reasons why I look the way I do that I, at that time, did not know about. I might have said that I shouldn’t be judged on my appearance. I might have said, “I’m trying.” Instead, I shrugged my shoulders and picked at my meal.

No matter how visible or invisible my body is, even when in conversation with women who are experiencing the same disease I am, it never gets easier to say that this – this is my body. It isn’t perfect. It doesn’t color within the lines.

But it still deserves the same respect as any other body.

*

When I feel my self-confidence plummeting and my self-image crumbling, my ritual of assessing the shape of my stomach becomes more than a daily thing. I’ll take my usual angles before my morning shower. Left side, right side, front view.

I check my reflection in the mirror when it’s time to change out of my professional clothes and into whatever outfit I plan to wear next. Sometimes it’s workout clothes. Sometimes it’s comfy clothes, one of the many t shirts worn soft by repeated trips through the washing machine and loose-fitting yoga pants that have received the same treatment. After a long day, it’s a tank top and shorts meant to wear to bed.

In between outfits, I check again. Left. Right. Front. By this point in the day, I’ve eaten at least two meals and drank plenty of water. There’s at least one cup of coffee made almost milky white with creamer. Probably a granola bar rescued from my desk drawer in my office. With each angle and the ongoing analysis running in my head, I sigh in exasperation. My stomach is no longer a slope, but something else. On days when I am too much, I feel uncomfortable even in my safest clothes. These are the days I want to cry. I can see the shiny remnants of stretch marks against the paleness of my skin, and sometimes I feel that they are signs that something is trying to claw its way out of my stomach.

Maybe if I let that thing out, then eventually I'll be able to stop. Stop staring at myself in the mirror. Stop…what?

I no longer have the willpower to deny myself food. I know when my body starts to protest from a lack of sustenance. My brain becomes the equivalent of a toddler who doesn't get what they want at the store and is on the verge of a tantrum. If I wait too long, the world spins and falls down.

But I still wonder – if I let the monster out, will I feel any better? Will I feel less unruly, less untamed?

Is there a monster to be let out? Maybe the monster is in my head and not my midsection.

Maybe there isn't a monster at all.

I'm still staring at myself in the mirror. I breathe in using the same techniques that, after years of band and choir, have altered the way I take in air. Let the diaphragm do the work. Breathe deeply so that your lungs fill with air and take up space inside your chest.

If I am aware of my breathing, I see my body change shape. If I hold everything inside, my breath my monsters my pieces of self-image my sense of self-worth – then my body takes up less space. Trained to alter myself to take up less space to create beauty. I am constricted, tense. Taught to use the space inside and limit the space outside.

I can only hold my breath for so long.

I feel myself, internally and externally, change shape. This time, the tears pool at the corners of my eyes, threatening to spill over. I can only hold in so much.

I exhale.

Locks

I'd had enough.

My hair was everywhere. There was a stray hair resting on the counter in my bathroom, sticking to my clothes, lounging casually on my pillowcase. Losing a few strands of hair each day is normal and expected. For me, this didn't seem normal, constantly finding strands here, there, and everywhere.

Finding lost hairs wouldn't have been so much of an issue if my hair didn't pose other problems. My hair had grown so long that I could no longer wear it down. It was only a matter of minutes before I started to overheat, and if I had to be outside with my hair down on a windy day, the breeze blew my hair around so much that the tangles and knots became maddening. Not to mention the amount of shampoo and conditioner it took to keep my hair clean. I hadn't bought or owned a hairdryer in years because, well, what was the point? The effort needed to blow dry my hair wasn't worth it.

The frustration with my hair extends beyond knots and shampoo and how my hair dries. The weight of my hair has, at times, been so great that it has triggered migraines. Pulling my hair into a ponytail or a bun and securing it tight is a feat -- an act that includes one hairbrush, at least two specialty hair ties designed for thick hair, and potentially several bobby pins. Simply keeping my hair out of my face has contributed to a patch where, at the point where my natural part meets my forehead, my hair has thinned. I've taken hair, skin, and nails vitamins for years now to make sure that the hair there grows back.

Hair is so much more than dead protein creeping out of one's head. At times, mine feels inescapable. The weight of carrying hair around reaches beyond the space of a person's head. Over time, people have attached a hefty significance to hair in general, but particularly women's hair. The way in which a woman wears her hair – the length, the color, the style – has become a way for a woman to signify who she is as a person and her beliefs, but has also, in some ways, become a part of the body that is seen as an invitation for commentary on who others think a person is or should be. The power and weight of one's hair are, in many ways, baffling.

I'd had enough.

Normally, I would have gone to my usual hairstylist, who runs a small salon just a few miles from my parents' house, but she was on vacation for another few days and couldn't fit me in until after I went back to graduate school four and a half hours away. My choices were to continue dealing with the mass of hair growing out of my head or trust a stranger. At least this place came with a recommendation from my overly picky sister.

As I stood at the counter, I thought that no one was there. It was awfully quiet, not even a radio playing in the back. For a moment, I thought that this was an opportunity for me to back out and casually walk to my car. After all, I hadn't had a haircut in a while – what, three years or so? – and it didn't look bad at all. I didn't need to do this.

I quickly found that the shop was open for business, and before I had time to talk myself out of this endeavor, I found myself sitting in the stylist's chair, heart racing, hoping for the best from this haircut. *Why did I think this was a good idea?* I asked myself.

Haircuts are complicated for me. Growing up, I never had the chance to tell people what I wanted to be done with my hair, so I never had any control over what the stuff growing out of my head looked like. My mom decided to keep it short, the kind of short that crept around my ears and framed my face in a way that made my face look too soft and pudgy, a stark contrast to my mom’s waist-length hair. As a kid, I thought I looked too much like a boy – chubby stature, short hair, refusing to wear dresses – before I understood why my mom kept such a tight rein on my hair. It was chaotic. I couldn’t braid my hair like the rest of my fellow Brownies for World Friendship Night for Girl Scouts or wear the sideways ponytails that were the rage in elementary school. My hair always looked like something foreign, something not my own, a fluffy mop plopped on my head. In some ways, it wasn’t my own, and by the time I was old enough to be handed control over the top of my head, I felt inept to figure out what to do with it. I wasn’t prepared.

Hell, I still don’t know what to do with it, which may be why I usually try to avoid haircuts. I don’t know the angles and layers and shapes. I don’t have the vocabulary to make sense of my hair.

If I don’t cut enough off, then what is the point of getting a haircut at all.

If I cut it too short, then my hair curls upward and outward, trying to defy gravity because, apparently, my hair doesn’t understand physics.

If I cut it somewhere in the middle, above my collarbone but not quite into a trendy pixie, then my hair frames my face in such a way that any skeletal or muscular definition fades away.

When the hairstylist, her blond curls contrasting against my freshly-brewed-coffee brown ones in the mirror, asked me how much I wanted to cut off, I froze again. I am not a numbers person, instead choosing to specialize in words and phrases instead of numerals and measurements. Six inches didn't feel like enough, but a foot felt like too much of a commitment. "Where would nine inches hit?"

The hairstylist rubbed the side of her hand against the middle of my upper arm. Considering I could almost sit on the ends of my hair, nine inches was a drastic change that, because of the thickness of my hair, had to take place one small snip at a time. Giving my hair one solid cut would most definitely break the stylist's shears. My heart rate picked up and I tried to hide the fact that I was out of breath. Was nine inches too much, too fast? I watched as the hairstylist got out her shears and prepared to cut my hair. Was that enough to get rid of the hair I was tired of carrying around?

As I nodded, saying nine inches was a good length to cut, I raced through the possible outcomes in my head.

My heart continued to speed up, and I wondered what the heart rate monitor in my Fitbit registered at that moment. I felt myself begin to sweat but couldn't decide if it was from having my blanket of hair covering most of my back, or it was the anticipation of those first few snips.

The hairstylist picked up her shears and I closed my eyes as she stepped behind the chair. *Stay calm*, I told myself. *Just keep breathing. It will be okay in the end.* The faint sound of sharpened metal against dead protein sounded like a cheese grater against my nerves as the woman cut the first locks of hair from my head, snip by snip.

One inch

My hometown of fewer than 800 people has six churches within township limits. Each church specifically dictated how my friends and I grew up. The two Baptist churches and the Methodist church invited only the Boy Scouts to a special Scout Sunday service twice a year. The Congregational Church hosted a pancake breakfast each year after the Memorial Day parade, the one and only parade my hometown hosted. Nearby, there was yet another church, the Catholic church with its own grade school. Church events sometimes determined who could or would go to middle school and high school dances. For those whose parents insisted that the whole family be in the pews on Sunday morning, church swayed the planning of sleepovers and birthday parties, the start time of Sunday sporting events, and whether a carwash fundraiser should start mid-morning or wait until those who went to church had time to get home, eat, and change their clothes.

The church that intrigued me the most, however, was further from the beaten path than the others, both literally and ideologically. Unlike other churches, the Apostolic Pentecostal was not located on either of the town's main roads. It seemed as if dropped from the clouds onto a plot of land surrounded by government-assistance-funded duplexes and a bunch of trees. The fact that the parking lot was full on both Wednesday and Sunday nights wasn't what piqued my curiosity. It was the fact that I only knew four people who went to that church.

They hardly said anything about it.

One of the few times any of the kids, a pair of sisters and a brother-sister duo, talked about church was when, on the school bus, someone asked one of the girls about her hair. She was a grade behind me and sassy to the point of coming across as mean. "Why is your hair so long?" someone asked.

Most of the girls I grew up with had varying lengths of long hair, but I did not. Instead of allowing my hair to grow down my back, my mom instead kept it cut short and encouraged it to grow outward against gravity since it wasn't allowed to creep downward. As a child, hairstyles were something that I associated with age: little girls had long hair, moms had hair somewhere in the middle, and grandmas had short hair. That was all I saw in the world around me, was that women cut their hair shorter as they aged.

"Because I'm not supposed to cut my hair. If I do, I'll get in trouble at church," she said, flipping her waist-length plait of perm perfect curls back over her shoulder. She sensed our confusion. "We learned in church that girls aren't supposed to cut our hair because it's what makes us special."

I still didn't get it. My mom and my Saturday morning PBS cartoons told me that I was special for a litany of other reasons: my sense of humor, my willingness to help other people, my talents, my hobbies, etc., but not because of my hair. As I got older, I learned that, in certain denominations of Christianity, women are discouraged from cutting their hair. In the Apostolic Pentecostal church, women do not cut their hair because it is believed that a woman's hair is a holy cover, an interpretation of a verse from 1 Corinthians 11. This passage, verses one through sixteen, describes a woman's long hair as being a source of her glory. Women who do not have their heads covered during prayer or prophecy bring dishonor to themselves:

> …But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head – it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil…Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman

> has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering…

Within a woman's hair lies power, apparently. The power to prove she is worthy of…something. Attention? Acceptance? Love? Womanhood?

Years and years later, while I worked on this essay, a college friend said, "Do some research on the context of that verse." As someone who is perpetually curious, I did some reading. There are several variations of how these verses are interpreted, even among biblical scholars, and especially outside of evangelical groups. Most likely, Paul wasn't telling people not to cut their hair, but instead was asking the Corinthians to think about the meaning of their hair in two cultural contexts that existed within the city. It turns out that there's more at stake than just hair.

Later that day, the day when the question of cutting hair originally came up at school, I asked my mom why the girls who went to the church down the road weren't allowed to cut their hair. "Well, some people think that's what's best for them and God," she said.

"Then why do I get my hair cut all the time?"

"Because until you learn to take care of it yourself," my mom said, "I will tell you what to do with your hair."

Two inches

My mom has a collection of stories about my childhood that she likes to tell. One of these stories spans a couple of decades, implicating my grandmother and Shirley Temple.

Grandma McKnight, my mom's mother, kept an autographed picture of Shirley Temple sitting on the mantle in the formal living room. The photograph was a staple in Grandma's house; I never remember it not being on the mantle because it had sat there, in its frame, for decades. Grandma told me the story of the one time she met Shirley Temple when they were children – my grandma and Shirley Temple were only eight months apart in age – at a launch of Shirley Temple-inspired dresses at the local Woolworth's in Grandma's hometown of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. I listened because Shirley Temple's place in my childhood spanned beyond one close encounter with Grandma over half a century before I was born. As a toddler, my dark brown hair grew in perfect spiral curls that bounced and twirled around pockets of nothing but air. My mom told me how I received compliments on my hair before I was old enough to know what a compliment was. At two years old, I got confused for a baby-sized version of Shirley Temple in the stuffed animal aisle of our local K-Mart. "Mom, this lady has a baby Shirley Temple in her cart!" a young girl screamed as my mom and I searched for a new toy.

The comparison didn't just stop with a couple of chance encounters. Because of my hair, my family got into a habit of buying me Shirley Temple movies. I willingly watched and helped put the VHS tapes of remastered movies into the VCR. I took my place somewhere in the living room – the middle of the floor or, as I got older, on the couch or taking the movies upstairs to my bedroom – and watched. Despite seeing the pictures of me as a toddler, I wondered why my family continued to add to this collection as I got older, a gathering of videotapes in plastic cases that took up an entire shelf of the video rack in the coat closet. I didn't see the comparison.

Decades later, while Grandma spent her declining years at her home next door, my mom snuck the original copy of Shirley Temple's autograph out of the house and replaced it with a copy in the same frame. Grandma's mind was falling down around her, and my aunt, Grandma's caretaker, kept shuttling Grandma's possessions out as quickly as possible, convinced that Grandma was days or weeks away from death's door. "I just wanted to make sure you have this," my mom said, handing me the original 8" x 10" headshot in a frame we found in one of the upstairs bedrooms at Grandma's house. I took it and hung it on my bedroom wall, then the living room wall of my first apartment. Each time I took the picture down to move somewhere else, it tore pieces of paint and plaster off the wall. Maybe Shirley was trying to say something after all these years, her message hidden just below a surface I never bothered to graze before. Maybe there was more to Shirley Temple's story, and even to my own story, than just pretty curls on the heads of smiling little girls.

Three inches

Four inches

Five inches

I was in fifth grade when I convinced my mom to let me grow my hair out. In retrospect, I probably wasn't mature enough to handle the responsibilities of having long hair. While my classmates experimented with their mothers' make-up, I ran around the back yard making up stories of jungles and pioneers in my head. While my classmates played with curling irons, I continued to find more and more ways to avoid brushing my hair. I intentionally overslept so I had to choose between breakfast and brushing my hair. Hairbrushes mysteriously disappeared. I got my hair just wet enough in the shower on certain evenings so it looked like I washed my hair. To me, it was a seemingly useless chore since my hair just got messed up again anyway. But I wanted to pin the butterfly clips in my hair and pull it through the ponytails that my peers did, so I finally convinced my mom to let me grow it out. When she said yes, I felt more like an adult. I had responsibilities now beyond loading the dishwasher every other night and keeping my bedroom clean.

"Oh Lord, are you in for it," Nancy, my Girl Scout troop leader and one of the few local hairstylists, said at my last regularly scheduled haircut. Nancy herself was a fiercely opinionated redhead who smoked too much and rubbed too many people the wrong way with her brutally honest way of speaking to adults.

At first, I thought having this responsibility – and growing hair – was great. No more haircuts every six weeks. No more fighting over the background color of my school pictures because, as my mom said every year, "you might as well get the traditional because, with your hair, I'm not paying an extra $3 for something we'll barely see." But as my hair got to an awkward length, I came to understand just how much responsibility came with having hair like my friends.

This realization came to a head when my mom, one day in the early summer between fifth and sixth grade, tried to brush a rat's nest out of my hair, a terrible tangle of strands already matted to my scalp that threatened to cover the back of my head. With each pluck of a comb or a hair pick, I felt my scalp's nerve endings snap to attention. I grew tired of having to deal with the rhythmic yanks pulling the skin of my head away from the tissue beneath. “Stop!” I cried. “It hurts!”

“Well, if you’d take better care of your hair, then it wouldn’t hurt so bad!” my mom replied.

More yanks. More tears. More exclamations from someone – me – who was quickly realizing that being a tomboy, or for that matter being a young woman, hurt more than I wanted it to. “Stop! You’re hurting my head!” I yelled at my mom. I never yell at my mom, who is normally a quiet and gentle soul. She is the kind of mother who would sigh and remind me in a calm tone that “this is what happens when you don’t take care of something,” as if this encounter with my hair and a hairbrush were on the same level as an injury to a well-loved toy or a tear in a favorite piece of clothing. She was the one who was always ready with cookies for a Girl Scout meeting and would take a day off work to help chaperone a field trip to the zoo. Today, for some reason, was different. Maybe it was my mom being a person with limits to her frustration. Maybe it was the early summer heat in our house without air conditioning. Maybe it was something else entirely that set her off.

I got up and stormed out of the living room. I passed the stairs and rounded the corner to the entry hallway where I came face to face with my dad, a large, surly figure whose presence intimidated almost everyone who crossed his path. My dad worked a lot of long hours in a loud and noisy plant that cut and processed structural steel. This was probably his only day off that week, and in the hours on his days off and in the evenings, his requests for quiet – except for the sound that he made – were one slight step away from demands. When my friends came over to play, they described my dad as scary and mean. When my younger sister’s friends came over to play, they stayed away from him as much as possible. By the time the youngest of my siblings was old enough to have playdates, she went to her friends’ houses instead of inviting them over. He took a step closer, and by reading the expression on his face, I knew that I had crossed a line in yelling at my mom.

My dad, who during the Vietnam War was a sergeant/drill instructor/barracks chief in the Air Force and a veteran’s brat himself, suddenly maneuvered our bodies without a single touch. Before I knew what was happening, he pinned me against the pale yellow wall of the hallway with nothing more than his index finger pressing into my sternum and his thundering presence. “Listen, little girl, you do not talk to your mother like that. Do you understand me?”

“But she was hurting me!” I tried to cry as my dad’s finger pressed harder and harder into the connective cartilage between my ribs. My dad had yelled at me for much lesser offenses, such as talking too much at dinner or wanting to read a book instead of playing outside. This moment was different. My dad left discipline, like almost everything else that having a family and home entailed, to my mom. The fact that my dad felt the need to intervene was unusual and scary.

His face got closer as I felt his bulk pressing against me through one finger, military tactics coming back to him as he tried to make his point. I saw the curly hair on the top of his head, the same curls I inherited from him. “I don’t care if she was trying to tear you limb from limb! You will not speak to your mother that way under my roof!” He forcefully pulled his finger away from my chest, releasing me from the wall. I started crying and ran upstairs to my lavender-colored bedroom, where I hid for several hours before I tried to act as nothing happened.

But something did happen. I felt so many things that the logical first response was to cry because processing what had happened, at the time, was a lot for an eleven-year-old to deal with. I was frustrated because I just wanted my hair left alone. I was angry because my mom didn't understand just how much it hurt to have my hair brushed that way. I was angry because my dad, well, how dare he intervene! I was scared because my dad had never gotten in a physical confrontation with my sisters or me before. Had he yelled before? Yes. Too much by some standards. Was he an impatient person? Yes. Too impatient, by many standards. Was he someone who got physical during an argument? Up until now – no.

What I saw in that moment was a side of my dad I hadn't seen before. This was a side of him that showed me that because I was a "little girl," a term he would use into my adulthood. Boundaries were not hard and fast between us. If he felt I was out of line, acting in a way that a child, a daughter, a woman – a "little girl" – should not act, that I had reached an age where yelling simply was not enough. Something had escalated. At that moment, he flipped a switch, moved a boundary, crossed a bridge. Words were no longer adequate tools for my dad to, in his world, keep me in line. He never touched my mom out of spite or malice. But me? Because I said something about my body and stood up for myself, I appeared to pose a threat. Threats are something my dad was trained to suppress or eliminate.

I still think about the consequences of this moment today. The way I don't like to be in tight spaces. The way the sounds of slamming doors or heavy footfalls make me tense. The most dependable way to make me cry is to have someone raise their voice with the slightest hint of anger. I react with tears despite hearing that raised, angry voice for as long as I can remember, probably for my entire life. I don't like having people I don't trust in my personal space when I sense it is hard to quickly escape. Crowded elevators, restaurants with tables and chairs too close to one another, even middle seats – they all make my heart speed up if I can anticipate an unknown person's skin coming in contact with mine. More often than not, even the thought of contact makes me tense up. It was then, in that confrontation with my dad, that I first realized there was something dangerous about my hair, about what that hair stood for.

Suddenly, long hair didn't seem worth it anymore, but I still let it grow.

My hair grew. And grew. And grew. It grew so long that it changed colors, and when my mom took me in for a haircut before my freshman year of high school, she asked why the last few inches of my hair were the color of straw. "It's because the ends are dead," Nancy said during one of the last haircuts she gave me before she moved away. "That's what happens when your hair grows too fast."

Six inches

Seven inches

Eight inches

Earlier that November evening, just two months before my thirtieth birthday, I spent a considerable amount of time in front of my bedroom mirror, trying to figure out what to do with my hair. Style, shake head in disgust, start over. The liquid-free version of lather, rinse, repeat. I wanted my hair away from my face, but still soft enough that I felt pretty. Wanted, maybe. It had been so long since I had been on a date that my nerves were getting the best of me.

A few hours later, I stood on my tiptoes in the entryway of his house, white walls and light hardwood floors flanking a white door that only locked with a little jiggling and convincing. He, a burly man I met online with a mess of almost black hair and beard, pulled me closer. He had at least a foot on me in terms of height, so to think about getting close enough to kiss him, I had to stand on my tiptoes to even get close. He had his fingers wound through my hair, giving my locks a gentle tug. “I didn’t take you for someone who would like this,” he said, pulling away slightly. I probably wasn’t supposed to like this, being treated a little on the rough side by a man who I hadn’t known for very long at all. To be honest, I don’t know when I was or wasn’t told how I should or should not like to be touched in this kind of situation beyond talk about consent. In any other context, having anyone pull my hair would cross boundaries of safety and respect, but this was somehow…different. Instead, I wondered how much longer we were going to linger at the door.

“I guess I’m just full of surprises,” I responded, my voice registering from somewhere deeper in my throat.

It was true. I surprised myself with how quickly I let myself get close to this man. After our first date just a week or so before that night we kissed long and passionately by his front door, I agreed to go back to his house after dinner at a local restaurant with a view of the city of Cincinnati that made me wonder why I would ever want to live anywhere else. Originally, we intended to just watch a movie and talk somewhere quieter than the restaurant. My friends, who wanted the details of my first date since a messy but quiet breakup with my high school sweetheart over Labor Day weekend, kept sending me text messages. While they asked if they needed to send a search party, fearing that the reason I wasn't responding to their messages was because I had gone on a date with a psycho axe murderer, I was falling into bed with this man after our first date, something I hadn't done before. Ever.

"Wow. You're so beautiful," he whispered as he slowly ran his slightly calloused hands over first my ribs, then my side, then my hip. I tried not to blush, and as he pulled me closer to him in the middle of his king-sized bed, I briefly wondered what was so wrong with what we were about to do in the first place. Deep down, I knew that this was my body's response to the first earnest touch from a man who desired me in years. My ex and I spent the last couple of years of our relationship avoiding intimacy of almost any kind.

But at this moment, here and now, at age 29, I wanted to know that my body still had the power to be desirable, because in a lot of ways I didn't feel like I could be wanted after such a long time of being pushed away.

Back by the door after our second date, he further knotted his fingers in my hair, tugging with a little more earnest. "Indeed," he said to my response about being full of surprises. I wondered just what I was getting myself into as I remembered what desire felt like.

Nine inches

I see the dark hair creeping all over me, slowly making its way out of not-quite-alabaster skin and covering places that, according to society, should appear hairless on a woman's body. My stomach. My chest. My face.

I know why that hair is here, emerging from my skin no matter what I do to remove it and vainly attempt to maintain a "normal" womanly appearance, or at least what we've been taught to understand as womanly. It's because something is happening inside my body, manipulating my hormones and forcing me to watch my diet, exercise more and sit less, and take birth control pills every day without fail. A diagnosis caught too late to do much else but to treat and live with, hoping that the disease progresses slower before the hair, one of the many outward symbols of what is going awry inside of me, destroys me even more.

This, these attitudes about hair, aren't the case everywhere. Sikhism forbids any form of hair removal regardless of one's gender. The Bahá'í Faith doesn't have as hard and fast rules about hair removal but discourages the practice unless someone is removing their hair for medical reasons. Some Hindu and Buddhist groups shave the heads of children. The particularly American emphasis on where hair should and should not be on any body, especially woman's body, is not isolated in its existence, but is also not universal, either.

"Why is this happening to me?" I asked doctor after doctor, time after time. Rhythms not established. Odd hairs growing in places they shouldn't be. Missed cycles. Fear and uncertainty that I would never know what was happening to my body.

"You need to lose weight," they all said.

“Why is this happening to me?” I asked when, during the summer of my twenty-ninth year, I went to the doctor because my body revolted against me for almost three weeks out of every six. After years of seeing nutritionists, low carb diets, portion control, and following every set of instructions my previous doctors gave me, nothing worked.

You are not normal, the tracking app where I logged my cycle and how I felt each day kept saying but not saying. The repeated alerts with “that’s odd” or the number of days I felt this way in the past month created a subtext further reinforcing that something was wrong.

“They should have caught this sooner,” said the fourth doctor. “You’ve been showing signs since high school.”

I see what the same disease has done to my friends, the pills and injections and diabetes diagnoses, the sleep apnea and the weight issues and the chronic fatigue syndrome, the funerals for babies born too soon despite multiple rounds of fertility treatments. But when those four letters – PCOS, or polycystic ovary syndrome – come up in conversation after another friend is labeled, the same line comes up in response from someone who has been there, too – “Well, at least you didn’t get the facial hair like some women do.”

But I did, and as I watch the Facebook videos and screenshots of Instagram posts of women who said *screw it* to the razors and waxing and other hair removal methods to make them look like nothing is wrong with the chemicals pulsing through their veins, I wish I could be so brave. Instead, I shave it off as often as I can. Hide it. After all, it was the same Gillette brand as what I have in my shower that told women to shave off their body hair as early as 1915, the year the first razor for women was released to the public.

It was important, though, not to call the act of women removing hair *shaving* because the term was decidedly too masculine, according to the Smithsonian. Just as the companies who made razors would soon send them to soldiers off at war, there was also a fight about language, about how to describe the same practice performed by different people.

Gillette wasn't the only one, but instead a moment in a long line of products that slowly, methodically, waged war on women's hair. Historians note that first, advertisements for depilatories and waxes and potions came after the hair on women's faces and arms. Then, as fashion trends changed and the American fixation on cleanliness grew with the onset of the Roaring Twenties, advertisements in magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *McCall's* called for the removal of underarm hair, citing new fashionable dresses with sheer sleeves, or no sleeves at all, and the bacteria that underarm hair could harbor. In 1930, an article in *Hygeia* described removing arm, underarm, and leg hair as a social convention. By 1964, 98% of women ages 15-44 removed body hair.

It makes me feel odd, scared even, my hair. Scared of what my hair means for me. What the presence of my hair where it "should" and "should not" be has the potential for as meaning expands outward.

In some ways, it makes me feel out of control. Powerless.

My mother didn't get the facial hair or the syndrome, but she had the cysts, and when I was thirteen, one ruptured and almost killed her on the operating table during surgery to repair a hernia. She didn't even know it was there, having conceived three daughters in ten years without any problems.

In this way, I am jealous of my mother. I know now that motherhood is a role that, unlike my mother, I have a high possibility of never being able to fulfill, regardless of whether I want to have children. Seeing them off to the first day of kindergarten, trying not to cry. Seeing them grow up and do great things, just like my mom does now. All of it seems like a crushing impossibility to me.

I am baffled by the power that comes with hair. In one moment, I feel the weight of it upon my head, blowing in the breeze and capturing the attention of the world to assert that yes, this is where I'm told my glory supposedly resides. But I don't feel glorious. I wonder what I did to make some celestial being, whoever one believes resides in the clouds, both bless and curse me at the same time, to have this stuff growing out of my head that makes me supposedly wanted and desired for my beauty, but to also have it crawling across other parts of my skin, making me feel repulsive. I fear undressing in front of my mirror in my bedroom because, beneath the multiple layers I wear to keep my midsection covered, the fine but wiry black hair creeps across my stomach, the ends reaching for each other to close me in. I wonder if, each time my boyfriend reaches for me, he notices that my body is not the same as those of other women. If he does, will he understand that this is not something of my choosing, or instead decide that he no longer desires me as he once did?

Instead, I feel like a beast in my dark follicle-framed cage, a century-old circus attraction that missed the memo that the show was over, a body who is human and yet not at the same time. In light of the low carb diet, the 150 minutes of exercise a week, and the take your pills reminder – birth control for hormones, iron for anemia, B12 to help iron absorption, magnesium for the migraines, melatonin on desperate nights to help combat the sleeping problems – and the hope-for-the-best kind of lifestyle I find myself in, the growth that inches across my skin makes me feel powerless as to what my body is doing to itself. Despite my best attempts, I am unwillingly destroying myself from the inside, with my only cry for help being the unruly hair covering my body that I don't want others to notice.

"What do you think?" the hairstylist asked as she brushed my hair in different directions, making sure that everything was the same length.

What did I think? A lot went through my head at that moment. As I looked at myself in the mirror, I felt myself start to calm down. The haircut didn't look nearly as bad as my terror led me to imagine. There was a noticeable difference in my hair, but not so much that my jawline and cheekbones melded into that shapeless blob of flesh I feared. I was still me, just with a little less of the hair I had a complicated relationship with.

But there was more to this hair cut than simply snipping strands and shaping the mass growing out the top of my head. I had attempted to take back control of one uncontrollable part of my body, to make some effort at reclaiming my sense of womanhood, even if that womanhood looks different because of what was going on inside of me. At an age when I had thought I had come into my own as a person, I was still learning to live as a person with an illness, but not one that people held fundraisers for or sponsored awareness months or ran 5Ks for to find a cure.

Sometimes, I wonder if it would be easier if my illness left me without hair. Instead of the course black strands growing in places where hair wasn't supposed to be recognizable, I wonder if it would make it easier to explain my disease if I walked through this world with a scarf tied around my head to hide my baldness. Or, if I had the courage, to simply move through this world with a bare head, challenging the notion that I, as a woman, needed to have a head full of glowing hair to be what I say I am. I thought back to all the times as a child when I saw women with long, thick, beautiful plaits of hair and wanted to have the same hair as them because that meant, at least in the conservative small town I grew up in, I was solidly a girl, then a woman. But now that I have that hair, there comes a price, and that price is to have the rest of my body seemingly fail me, piece by piece.

But no one is going to make a PCOS awareness T-shirt to wear. There are no fights against this disease, like there are obesity and cancer and diabetes, although all three of those conditions can be associated with the disease I have. There are no rallies, no color-themed sporting events. The merchandise displays don't appear in stores, but instead find a home on the internet. No one cares about the ovaries that don't work properly or the wanton hair growing on bodies, because it's hard to sexualize a woman's disease when you can't see the parts that aren't functioning properly. Or when the disease transforms a body into something that we, as a society, have determined is part female and part…something else.

The only fight here is against my hair.

It is something that I sat with in an uneasy silence of acceptance, knowing that I am not alone, but also knowing that most of the outside world will not see or hear about the kind of body I inhabit. The kind of hair I have to cut, shave, disguise. Live with, deal with. Try to make those closest to me understand and, hopefully, accept as well.

Even with acceptance, though, comes some degree of pain. Not everyone understands just what chronic fatigue does to you by the time Friday evening rolls around and the thought of going out with friends or colleagues seems impossible because you have used all your energy for the day. And even though she knows and means well, nothing stings more than your mother glancing at the endcaps in stores during the holidays when you know she wishes that there was a grandchild to buy presents for and put under the tree at Christmas as you both wait to hear those shrieks of joy.

The pain of having to tell someone you love that trying to have a family of more than just two may be the most difficult thing you as a couple will ever have to face.

I ran my fingers through my newly cut hair, feeling the stubble by my ear graze the back of my hand ever so slightly. For the first time since my diagnosis, I had a say in what my hair looked like, what it did, where it went. In this tensely fleeting moment, I felt beautiful again.

But that moment only lasted so long, and with it my silent acceptance. A few short weeks after this haircut, millions of women would take to the streets on my thirtieth birthday to protest the incoming president's policies against women and to assert that women of all types have voices and rights, too. Continued efforts to strip me and millions of other women who relied on birth control not only to avoid pregnancy, but to also simply function on a daily basis resulted in women dressing up as Offred from Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, marching and protesting decisions made by white men to police women's bodies. They wore Offred's costume from the book, a book where I never placed myself as a character because, if I were a creation of Atwood's imagination, I would have been sent south to The Colonies to clean up radiation, my skin peeling off until I died.

An unwoman, as they called us in the book.

My acceptance of my disease was no longer silent, my body no longer quiet, my hair no longer something that was just there, but instead, by virtue of being a part of my body, became a site of political debates so loud that you couldn't help but hear them screaming for recognition. Before I knew it, I found myself sending emails and writing to my lawmakers telling them just what it took for me to function on a daily basis, why I needed affordable access to quality healthcare, and why those seemingly tiny 28-packs of beige and brown pills had such a huge impact on my ability to live, work, and enjoy life in a way that felt something like normal. I had a way to feel something like me. My body was increasingly up for a debate, and I felt the impending doom lingering on the horizon, the possibilities of what would happen if people who didn't understand got their way.

Unruly hair, covering me even more quickly. My stomach. My chest. My face.

It won't get easier, telling people about my disease. *But your story needs to be out in the world*, my activist friends tell me. *You're so brave*, they add. But I never feel brave. I feel the desperation in my voice each time I emailed and filled in comment boxes on petitions – *Please don't take this away from me.*

What *did* I think of my haircut?

My pulse slowed as I let out a long-held sigh of relief that I kept buried in my lungs for most of the time I sat in the chair. This was my hair – not a disease's hair, but mine. I had a say in how it was displayed in this world.

"I like it," I said, a smile growing across my face.

Flash Paper

No one ever came out and said it, but I always got the idea that I was supposed to be seen and not heard.

“You’re being too loud!”

“Can’t you stop talking?”

“Quiet!”

My mother never tried to silence our voices, the voices of my sisters and me. *It’s because your dad hears noise at work all day*, the adults said. *He just needs some quiet.*

*

Used in the world of special effects, flash paper burns instantly. Flash paper leaves behind no smoke or ashes. Once ignited, flash paper only exists for a brief moment before it ceases to be. It doesn’t leave behind smoke or ashes. Flash paper remains only as a memory.

*

I started talking late. So late that my mother, who sat in her rocking chair while her pregnant body glided back and forth, back and forth while reading all of the late 1980s’ books on how to raise a child, took me to the family doctor when I hadn’t started talking on time. As a first-time parent, she was worried that there might be something wrong with me.

Dr. Castaldi checked me over from head to toe, in my eyes and mouth and ears, and issued his diagnosis. “There’s nothing wrong with her,” he said, reassuring my mom. “She just doesn’t have anything to say yet.”

*

It is easy to make flash paper. You will find various instructions on the internet, as well as cautions against mixing strong acids without the proper safety gear. One website says that their instructions will leave you with “professional-grade material you can use to astonish your family and friends!”

I wonder if there are more dangers in the creation of flash paper than the mixing of strong acids without safety equipment. Combining multiple strong things into one space poses a risk, especially a space that is purposefully fragile. One may not know what that purpose is, but fragility works in ways that are both incredibly beautiful and dangerous.

An opportunity for voicing praise gone up in flames.

*

My favorite and only story of childhood rebellion usually involves learning how to speak properly.

In third grade, the school assigned me to speech therapy because I allegedly spoke with a slight lisp. “Snake, sit, sand, spell,” the speech therapist said, exaggerating the ways in which her mouth made “s” sounds properly.

I saw nothing wrong with the way I spoke. In fact, I was angry and upset that I was the only one of my friends, a group that largely consisted of kids who were labeled as talented and gifted, to be pulled out of art class every other week to sit in the scary windowless therapy room in the basement of our century-old primary school. “Thnake, thit, thand, thpell,” I repeated back.

“I’m sorry, but there’s nothing we can do for your daughter,” the speech therapist told my mom at parent-teacher conferences. “She just won’t cooperate.”

“That’s because there’s nothing wrong with her in the first place,” my mom said.

Eventually, my speech sorted itself out, not for the work of a speech therapist, but by the way of my simply growing into the sounds I needed.

*

The key to making flash paper work is nitric acid. The more scientific name for flash paper is nitrocellulose, a combination of nitric acid and cellulose (paper.) Nitrocellulose sounds far less exciting and awe-inspiring than flash paper, but as with many scientific names, the purpose here is not to incite awe and wonder at the world around us but instead describes and categorizes based on composition and function.

Nitric acid is created by mixing distilled nitrates with sulfuric acid. The resulting mixture is colorless or pale yellow in color. The acid does not occur naturally and is only made in laboratories, but once mixed, has corrosive qualities and is said to react violently with materials not made of metal.

Nitric acid is not the only scientific creation that reacts violently against established categories and distinctions with which it does not wholly agree.

*

I’ve never been good at talking about my feelings. Whatever the root cause is – fear, insecurity, my knack at internalizing everything – causes me to freeze when someone asks me how I’m feeling. “Oh, I’m fine,” is my default frozen response. When I thaw, the response begins as a trickle and slowly builds to a flood.

As a teenager, I took my feelings out on my body as a way of coping with them. My feelings were things I needed to put away, and my body seemed to be the perfect and only place I felt I could put those things. Now, the physical scars are so faded that they are barely noticeable, but the memory is still there. Sometimes, I feel the invisible hands of my frustrations grabbing my arms and shaking me. The urge to use my body as a place of destruction hasn't welled up in years, but those arms and hands of frustration and anger still find their way to me.

I hear the voice of a memory inside my head. I drift back to the only time I allowed the blades of my razor sing across the skin of my stomach in the shower, speaking words that I could not say out loud. The boyfriend, both of us in high school, seeing the two thin scratches the next time we fooled around, stopped. "Please don't," he said, pulling me closer to him as everything came to a halt.

I wonder why it is his voice that speaks my memory instead of my own.

*

To make flash paper, one must first set up a well-ventilated workspace. Put on protective clothing: gloves, apron, goggles. Carefully mix nitric acid, sulfuric acid, and baking soda. Use 100% pure cotton paper. Soak the paper in acid. Soak the paper repeatedly in water to wash away excess acid. Another series of soakings and dryings that must always be maintained at a distance from the human experience that flash paper aims to create.

The most important step is that all the creating must happen underneath the ventilation hood, but the creator must not be under the hood. The maker must be separate from the experience.

*

In graduate school, when I first discovered and read French feminist theory, a lot of things suddenly made sense. The idea that language is patriarchal and women's experiences are unrepresentable by language systems clicked in my head. The silence of women suddenly became loud with my newfound exposure to the theory behind what I had internalized all along but didn't have a name to put to the idea.

The more I read, the more my voice's experience made sense. Women's voices. The ways in which mine always seemed to stand out, too loud, against the quiet whispers of those around me.

Be quiet.

You're too loud.

Stop talking.

You make a lot of noise.

Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva.

The longer I sat with these theorists and thought about them, I wondered if it isn't so much that women's experiences are unable to be represented by language. I wonder if there isn't a disconnect between describing experience and comprehending experience. Maybe there was a time and place where this disconnect did not exist – maybe – but maybe we have gotten to a point where there are words to describe women's experiences. It could be that the problem is in understanding and comprehending those words and the experiences they represent.

You need to learn to control your volume.

You sure do have a set of lungs.

If I can hear you, you're too loud.

Quiet down!

The realization that my voice was never meant to be heard both devastated and motivated me. And as the world suddenly shifted and those in charge of Washington silenced more and more women's voices, I found myself speaking louder and louder.

*

To ignite a piece of flash paper, do the following:

1. Take the flash paper to a neutral location.
2. Hold the flash paper with something other than your hands. A pair of tongs or forceps are recommended, although the cartoon hand in the picture looks like it's using tweezers.
3. Light a match.

The key to experiencing flash paper is distance. The creator cannot be included in the experience.

*

"You don't know what you're talking about. You haven't lived. I have!" my dad shouts as he points at his chest, leans forward, and tries to win any kind of intellectual debate or argument by speaking in a voice that is less a yell and more an attempt at raising the volume so he can hear himself.

The number one way to set me on fire is to tell me that I don't know what I'm talking about. In the moments that it takes the fire to ignite, I become guilty of intellectual snobbery and remind myself of all the years I've spent in school. I remind myself of the experiences I've had in my thirty-some years of life that I never told him about because I've decided there are parts of my life I don't want him to know. Patriarchal language deeming my experiences unrepresentable.

Those moments I've kept from him come to mind when I wonder if he heard or understood what I had to say. They pile up on one another: the times my father declared he didn't care about what had happened at work that day or that nobody wanted to know what I had to say. The number of times I was told that no one wanted to hear what I had to say, that what I said or did wasn't good enough, or, worse yet, when something I said was dismissed with the wave of a hand. This is where, I wonder if the theories surrounding language and representation and women's experiences have evolved over time, or if maybe they could use some expansion. As I get older, I oscillate between thinking about these moments as language not being able to describe my experiences and the inability or unwillingness of listeners to comprehend.

Most often, though, I walk away when my father tries to start such conversations. The certainty that this will be another silencing washes over me. One of the few times I spoke up was on the way home from a June trip to Dunkin' Donuts the next town over to treat him to an iced coffee and the promise of a free donut with his drink. After he retired, he didn't get treats like that very often. As he munched and ranted about how he thought Pride didn't need to exist to celebrate "people making stupid decisions," I offered to let him walk the rest of the way home if he was going to continue his rant. He stopped talking and faced forward, staring at the windshield and drinking his iced coffee for the rest of the ride home.

Each time the silence and the accompanying realization washes over me, it happens again.

A few clicks of anticipation.

The first lick of flame on the paper.

The flash!

The awe of the crowd, except in my mind, half the crowd is speaking and the other half wonders why they aren’t being heard.

Smile!

“Smile, Ashley! Why you gotta look so serious?”

~ ~ ~

Most people know me because of my facial expressions. Even though I’m in my thirties, I have yet to master the skill of what my face says. By nature, I am an animated communicator and, apparently, the filter for nonverbal communication never quite developed. Sometimes, my face says what my mind holds back.

Mostly, though, I am known for almost always having a face that reflects pleasantness. When I was in middle and high school, my friends would challenge me to make a mean or angry face while we rode the school bus up and down the back country roads of our school district. I contorted my face into what I thought was something mean or angry. I scrunched my eyebrows, lowered my chin, narrowed my eyes. After a minute or two, the challenge was called off with laughter. “I don’t think Ashley is capable of making a face that isn’t nice,” a classmate said.

“I don’t think I am, either,” I said as the school bus hit another pothole or bump in the road and, briefly, we all went slightly airborne.

*

“Smile, Ashley! You look like an old sourpuss!”

More often than not, the men in my family are the ones telling me to smile.

*

Smiling is hardwired into human nature. Babies start smiling socially at six to eight weeks of age but will flash smiles as a reflex earlier than that. Many cultures have positive interpretations of smiles, but there are some places where smiling is seen as deceptive or sinister. The language-learning platform Babble cites studies discussing the relationship between what's called "uncertainty avoidance" (UA) and cultural attitudes towards smiling. UA is based on the stability or instability of social institutions, and the lower the measure of UA, the less favorably a culture or society views smiling. According to Kuba Krys, a psychologist affiliated with the Polish Academy of Sciences, in countries with higher instances of corruption, such as India, Argentina, and the Maldives, smiling is viewed as dishonest.

According to an article in the *International Journal of Psychology*, social perception studies show that people who smile are viewed more favorably than those who don't smile and that this perception is more commonly held by women than men. Women are also more positive in how they interpret other people's smiles, with women finding people who smile to be more trustworthy. I wonder, though, if this is culturally specific in ways that are not mentioned in this study. This same article reports that women are also expected to be more communal, expressive, cooperative, and kind than men. Women have, over time, been expected to be the protectors of social harmony, which creates a continuous loop of cause and effect in terms of smiling because of or due to this.

A smiling face has acquired many associations with qualities the person may possess. People view those who smile as having higher rates of communion-related characteristics, such as likability, friendliness, honesty, conciliation, happiness, and attractiveness, to name a few. The quality of a smile, though, also has an impact on our interpretation of a person's true feelings and motivations. Sincere smiles more clearly communicate a person's mood or mental state than insincere smiles. The more sincere a smile is, the more benefits the act of smiling has psychologically.

Which came first – the expectation or the smile?

*

“Smile, Ashley! It can’t be that bad!”

There are days when it is that bad. The stress is too much. The sleep too little. The work needs to be done. The pain – in my head, in my abdomen, wherever it is – is too much to handle even after all the coping mechanisms I have gathered over time. Sometimes, the world has just gone to shit and even I, with my eternal optimism and trust in the inherent goodness of humanity, just get fed up, so much so that smiling isn’t worth it.

*

The smile has a somewhat convoluted history.

The Bible has only one instance of smiling named for what it is in the Old Testament. In the Book of Job, about suffering at the hands of God, Job is the one to flash the only smile before the birth of Jesus. In Job 29:24, it reads that Job “smiled on them when they had no confidence, and the light of my face they did not cast down.” But even then, when the passage is cross-referenced across various translations and versions of the Book of Job, the smile fades in and out of this narrative. Sometimes Job smiles, sometimes he laughs, and in one instance, Job mocks the people looking at him. Out of all these translations, though, most of those who are surrounding Job at this moment doubt his smile, as if they thought someone who endured that much misery cannot possibly smile. Not even Jesus is described as smiling in the Bible. Characters shine, but they do not smile.

In the Book of Job, it seems as though smiling and suffering are not compatible, that we lack the capacity to think about how someone can feel multiple emotions at the same time. The sense of wonder associated with Job's story resonates with me; I understand the comments from those in awe of how often I smile even amid suffering. For me, a smile sometimes distracts me from the reality of what I feel, what I experience, so that I don't have to explain or justify what I don't yet have the words or the energy to understand or communicate. Smiles both defend and deflect. There is less of a chance that I will have to offer an explanation before I am ready.

Eastern religions, however, have a different point of view when it comes to smiling. Members of the Hindu faith living in India and much of southeast Asia see smiling as part of being a good host, and that smiling and hospitality go together. Welcoming a guest into one's home equals welcoming a deity into the home, and vice versa. Although the original Buddhist religious texts do not mention smiling as a part of their narratives, some Buddhist figures are depicted as smiling, but not always. Buddha's serene smiles reflect the enlightenment Siddhartha Gautama attained. In his enlightenment, Gautama, now Buddha, found the path out of suffering and towards bliss, which left him smiling for centuries.

We should not always take smiles as a given, a certainty. When saved for special occasions, the smile has the power to radiate outward across time and space.

*

"Smile, Ashley! You look like your face is going to break!"

One of my signature characteristics has, for some of those around me, become so common place that not smiling is cause for commentary. When forcing that smile becomes too much of a task to handle, I let my true feelings decide the shape of my face. I can only fake a smile for so long.

There are days where I feel like my face, along with the rest of me, is going to break. I still put on a smile, but that smile never seems to be good enough for those who expect me to always have a smile on my face. For them, a weak smile is just as bad as no smile at all.

*

Women didn't always play the same part in the history of smiling.

For the longest time, smiling and laughing were considered immoral or sinful expressions of emotion for women. Essayist Amy Cunningham writes that the expectation, at least in European religious writings, codes of conduct, and art, was that women were not to display emotions, except for when women looked at their children with a serene expression that resembled how the Virgin Mary smiled at her child. I find this odd since Mary is never described in Christian texts as smiling at her child, nor does her child smile at anyone. Mary is faithful and obedient, humble and spiritual, but outside of the Gospels and the Book of Acts, she doesn't have a presence in the rest of the New Testament. It was believed that the portrayals of Mary smiling at her child were to set up a contrast between Mary and Eve, who was viewed as sinful and wicked. Part of me wonders if they knew where this story was going, but that's another train of thought for another time.

For European upper-class women, women were expected to remain covered, not only as a way of preventing others from seeing their facial expressions but as a way of separating women from the rest of the world. Allowing women the opportunity to inspire others to sin or engage in a tensing of a small collection of muscles in their face, would, no doubt, cause the fall of humankind. The only saving grace, it seems, was that women could smile at their children.

Even though science has since proven that smiling does do people psychological good, there is a reason that the cliché *the road to Hell is paved with good intentions* still exists. I would like to think that women's abilities to smile, to laugh, to express happiness through their bodies, happen with the best of intentions. It turns out, though, that the path towards fire, brimstone, and eternal damnation is littered with smiles and laughter, a brief flash of either causing one to go up in flames.

*

"Smile, Ashley! You never smile anymore."

Psychologists who study smiling argue that, if people, particularly Americans, would learn how to read smiles better, we would see that a smile can express a myriad of emotions beyond just happiness.

I agree.

*

I have a range of facial expressions, even if those childhood challenges on the school bus tried to prove something different. There's the genuine smiling face, which hides my teeth but still sends the message that I am warm and friendly, someone you can approach without worry.

My everyday smiling face is what most people know me for, which is not as exuberant as a genuine smiling face but sends a similar message. I have the concerned smiling face, which looks like I'm probably still smiling, but with raised eyebrows, forehead tilted forward, and questioning what I just heard or saw.

Then there is what I call my serious face. Not one that is stern or formal, but instead the face that looks at someone and asks *are you serious*. This face first requires a sense of disbelief or critical concern based on choices or statements someone has made. Out of these feelings of disbelief or concern, or even sometimes general frustration, comes what friends describe as "The Face": head tilted to the left, lower jaw tucked in slightly. Eyebrows raised. My smile transformed into a form that is something between a pucker and a frown. After my face has settled into this arrangement, I linger for a long second or two before asking a question.

This is the face those around me have come to recognize. Some of my friends openly enjoy seeing my animated nature show itself this way. A friend of mine unleashes a roaring laugh whenever "The Face" shows up. I once asked her what she found so funny.

"It's just your face," she said, wiping tears from her eyes. "Your face just says it all."

*

Around the turn of the 20th century, society started to see women smile more.

Advertisements with cheerful women selling the newest products, from drinks to home goods to cameras, appeared in public spaces in new ways. While the women in these advertisements were just gaining social acceptance because they – gasp! – shared smiles with a public audience, there was also a movement toward smiling as something that wasn't sinful, but instead indicated a certain wholesomeness that endorsed the featured products. After all, if a camera can make the woman on a sign smile, then there must be something noble and good about having one of those cameras, right? It seems that the ushering of women's smiles into public acceptance also rode on the coattails of capitalism, showing us that our engagement with an economic system rooted in the exchange of goods is as natural as smiling.

It wasn't just capitalism that got tangled up in the acceptance of women's smiles. Slowly, as people imagined how they would smile with that new Coke-a-Cola or lamp or camera, we began to imagine what life would be like if we could also have *her* – the smile, the wholesomeness, the beauty this woman put on display next to the stuff we're convinced we need to buy. The danger lies here in the equation of stuff equals happiness equals smiles equals beauty equals womanhood, because if one factor in this equation falters, then the whole system may fall apart, which some would argue absolutely cannot happen.

After all, it is smiling women who are responsible for social harmony and stability.

*

"What's wrong, Ashley? Why aren't you smiling?"

"What if I don't want to smile?"

A pause.

"You look so much nicer when you smile."

*

Cunningham, in her essay "Why Women Smile," writes about how other countries haven't been so keen on adopting the American smile.

Corporations such as McDonald’s and Disney have tried. They set up camp in countries such as Russia and France, thinking that they could replicate the success these companies saw in the United States. But, as Cunningham writes, after setting up a new restaurant or amusement park, both of which are known as havens for blissful smiles, the American members of these teams sent overseas to launch these brands had a complaint.

The Americans couldn’t get the people they employed “to smile worth a damn.” Smiling has, in its own way, become a signature part of American culture, but also a reason why those in countries such as France, Russia, and Ukraine tend to view Americans as vapid and shallow.

A part of the smile’s history, the story of how we exist and move in this world, has been shouldered by those who have been marginalized. Cunningham writes that the weight of the smile in the mid-1800s was mostly placed on women and African Americans, the upturned corners of their mouths signaling to whoever looked upon their faces that these people were harmless. The smile at this time was seen as an abdication of power and agency, letting those around them know that they posed no threat. As curators at the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University write, portraying African American slaves as smiling not only served as a way of maintaining slavery, but also signaled to the viewer that this person was willing to serve, was friendly, was safe. Stability had been maintained.

As time wore on, however, there was a shift in smiling and a rejection of images that depicted women and African Americans as eternally smiling. Civil rights activists in the 1960s adopted new understandings of what smiling faces could do and, with a knowledge that a face without a smile has its own set of interpretations, took other facial expressions with them as they marched through the streets and gave speeches in front of crowds. This contrasts with how African Americans had been portrayed in popular media and advertising previously. The Jim Crow Museum writes that "Uncle Tom," the generic name used to describe the docile, smiling African American slave, became a slur during the Civil Rights Movement and was used to describe activists who were too passive, too conservative, too accommodating, or too religious. To refuse smiles and smiling was to reject the Uncle Tom label, directing attention away from smiles and bodies and toward necessary work.

Society, however, did not seem to lessen the expectation that women should smile. In fact, pictures of women from the 1960s depict more exaggerated smiles, even as America faced a moment of reckoning with its past, present, and what its collective future would look like.

*

"Whoa, Double A's not even smiling. You know this is serious."

Friday night video chat with my friends from college who live 700 miles away. I am in *a mood*. I need to vent. I have a mixed audience.

After I've let it all out, one of the first reactions is to my lack of a smile. "You know it's bad when Double A isn't smiling. She's about to start flipping some tables."

My lack of smile not only upends social harmony but the furniture as well.

*

Sometimes I don't want to smile because of my vanity.

In my entire lifetime, there have only been two years, when I was in elementary school, when I have had dental insurance. I have been to the dentist exactly once in my entire life.

Sometimes I don't want to smile, to flash a pearly grin, because I know my teeth are not perfect. Thankfully, the one dentist visit I did have saved me from a lot. I didn't need braces. My teeth were healthy and strong, although small for my age, something that I inherited from my maternal grandmother and my mom. I do have a tooth that is naturally discolored in a way that makes it look dirty. In high school, playing the bassoon in concert band required an embouchure that caused me to develop a slight overbite. As an adult, I drink enough coffee and tea that the color of my teeth needs some help from a whitening toothpaste.

It's not that I haven't taken care of my smile. But when faced with the choice between showing off a smile that hasn't had access to care and keeping my mouth closed, there are days when it's easier to concoct a smile that keeps my teeth a secret, little pearls tucked away for safekeeping.

*

One of the most common places women are told to smile is in the workplace.

Inc Magazine shares the findings of a 2019 survey on women and being told to smile in the workplace. The results were surprising. They showed that 98% of women surveyed, representing a wide range of professions, had been told to smile at work at some point in their careers. Of the women participating in the survey, 37% reported that the most recent place they were told to smile was in the workplace, while 36% of women surveyed held senior- and executive-level positions within their companies, which made this group the most likely to receive these comments.

The article reports what some of us already know, that microaggressions directed toward employees decrease productivity. Additionally, *Inc Magazine* says that "being told to smile had a direct impact on feeling underappreciated at work, especially when the advice comes from a female boss."

Additionally, being told to smile goes hand-in-hand with language softening, the deliberate use of less assertive words, tones, and inflections in writing and speech, and how we perceive women leaders. We've seen numerous instances of times when strong women leaders have been referred to as bossy or pushy instead of recognizing their skills for what they really are. Language softening diminishes not only the value of women's skills but also creates a loss of agency and professionalism.

But it isn't just from bosses and colleagues.

One instance comes to mind. When I was seventeen, I worked at the local McDonald's during the opening shift. Because this restaurant was right off the highway connecting Akron, Youngstown, and Pittsburgh, the early-morning shift meant that a substantial number of our customers during those pre-dawn hours were truck drivers. As I replayed this memory, one such truck driver came in, his face, hands, and clothes smeared with oil and grease. He stepped up to the counter and, before ordering, asked me a question. "Why is your shirt a different color than the guy back in the kitchen?"

I explained that the color of our shirts denoted our leadership position in the restaurant and that my red shirt denoted that I was a crew trainer, the tier of employee between regular crew and management. “Oh, so you’re like, in charge here or something?”

“Not really,” I said with a chuckle. “Sometimes I like to think I am.”

The truck driver placed his order, a breakfast sandwich meal with a large strawberry milkshake despite the chill outside, and I bagged his order, all the while maintaining the smile I was expected to keep on my face for the remaining seven hours of my nine-hour shift on that Saturday. I handed the man his bag and cup and, as I took a step back from the counter, said “Thanks for stopping in! Enjoy the rest of your day!” and went back to work.

He lingered, unwrapping his straw as I kept busy behind the counter. After a few moments and sips of his milkshake, he waved at me as if he needed something. “Can I help you?” I asked.

The truck driver leaned over the counter, whispering as if he was sharing a secret. “You’ve got such a nice smile. I’d like to take you home with me if you know what I mean.”

This time, I took more than one step back and felt the smile instantly fade from my face. I turned my back as the truck driver made his way towards the door, winking and tipping his hat in my direction. I walked down the row of fry vats and toward the office, where my female manager sat doing paperwork. She saw that something happened on the security cameras but couldn’t understand why I walked away at that moment. She hadn’t heard what had been said, and when I told her, nothing in her facial expression changed.

"What was wrong with that?" She glanced at the security camera screen and saw someone else walk into the lobby. "You've got a customer."

I was seventeen. The last thing I wanted to do was to wait on another customer, let alone smile. The differences in the comments about smiling, the suggestive from a stranger and the subtle one from a manager, were dizzying, especially when my personal boundaries had been crossed and no one seemed to care. At that time, the non-response from my manager felt like betrayal. If she didn't get it, I wondered, then how was I supposed to feel?

*

Cunningham writes that American women smile so often and in such a way that the Smiling Woman has become "a peculiarly American archetype."

While search after search for the Smiling Woman archetype returns two types of results, Cunningham's essay and scholarship on the mammy character that exists as a racist caricature, I wonder if this is true. Has the Smiling Woman become another archetype to add to our list? If so, how did that happen so quickly? In her essay, Cunningham writes:

> Smiles are not the small and innocuous things they appear to be: Too many of us smile instead of showing what's really on our minds. Indeed, the success of the women's movement might be measured by the sincerity – and lack of it – in our smiles. Despite all the work we American women have done to get and maintain full legal control of our bodies, not to mention our destinies, we still don't seem to be fully in charge of a couple of small muscle groups in our faces.

Is that how we got here?

That is one way we got here.

*

“Smile, Ashley!”

Sometimes, when I hear those words, I simply walk away. There are days where the expectation to smile is too much, and the only method of self-preservation is to let the façade fall away.

*

I think about the times I’ve been told to smile and how the minute intensity of each of those moments builds until the force of the cracks in my personal space threatens to overwhelm me.

Saying no is not a strength of mine. I’ve been smiling for so long that I can no longer separate the smiles that come naturally from the smiles that I have been socially conditioned to display on my face.

Granted, I have plenty to smile about: friends and family and foods that sustain me, flowers and words and the beauty of clouds. I have reasons to smile of my own volition. I can feel my pulse rising and falling and, when I focus, can hear the faint whistling of my breath as it passes in and out of my body. I am alive, which for me, is an opportunity to smile.

I acknowledge, though, that there are plenty of things in this world that prevent smiles, that make a smile dangerous, that have put people in situations where smiling is deadly. This world is not all sunshine and rainbows and the flash of pearly white teeth. No one should be told to smile when there are so many reasons not to.

I can think of many reasons. ~~S~~ometimes the pain of my condition stops me in my tracks, when a cyst swells or shifts and strikes a nerve causing a blinding stab in the abdomen. All I can do at that moment is breathe, deep and slow, and wait until it passes, the imaginary knife withdrawing from my ovaries. In these moments, smiling not only feels like a lie, but one I cannot tell even for survival.

There are also days when I feel the fatigue, the anxiety, the mix of feelings and states of being swirling around in my head. It is all I can do to hold back the wetness of tears or the heaviness of sleep. A smile is not a thought that crosses my mind when my first impulse is to lay my head down on my desk despite it being barely noon, or to find a place where I can put a door or a wall between me and the rest of the world and think about how it is possible to just dissolve.

These are not the only reasons I have to not smile. Of course, there are the comments I get about my appearance. My dad has, in recent years, become fixated on my hair. When I ask – “why do you care?” – or – “this is not your business” – he replies with bewilderment. “I’m just worried,” he says. Although I have told him, he claims to know nothing of my condition or the hormonal imbalances that are the root of much of what my dad sees as problems, but I know are effects of a medical condition. Instead, the insistence on smiling in spite of everything feels like a forced conformity, a way of someone else continuing to deny who I am and how my body functions.

I can find more reasons not to smile when I watch or read the news, especially when there’s talk about the need to further regulate access to birth control and women’s healthcare, acting as though the card of 28 tiny pills that sit in my desk organizer doesn’t have any other purpose besides preventing babies. I sit at my computer and type, time after time, about why access to women's health care should be a priority, about the years it took for me to receive a proper diagnosis, of the times when I have had to do my best to make it through the day despite feeling like the life had been drained out of me because I couldn't get the help I needed.

These are times when I can pinpoint the reason I am smiling. In those instances, my smile is not a genuine smile, but instead my smile is the one I've been conditioned to have on my face because that is what a lot of other people, even some of those who know me the best, expect from me. I struggle to imagine any woman who is happy to have the control over her body legislated by those who know little to nothing about women's bodies, about their health, or about medicine in general. But there is still that expectation to smile because, after all, *it can't be that bad*. In reality, it is.

Until a person has been there, can we really say that the Smiling Woman is the norm, the expectation, instead of the exception?

The weight that causes these cracks keeps pressing on me. The cracks continue to spread.

It is this roller coaster, a journey of smiles and frowns that makes us feel whole, that spreads the cracks in the façade. My personal space begins to leak out into the open, and suddenly my fight to determine the nature of smiling becomes something larger. It makes me uncomfortable. As someone who prefers to be behind the scenes, I am more comfortable as the orchestrator, the technical director. Being put on display and having to fight this fight has the potential to chip away at me more than the question of smiling.

*

"Hello, Ashley. I saw your profile and was mesmerized by your smile."

-- Random stranger who, upon finding my profile on a dating website, tracked down my work email address to tell me about my smile.

I promptly deleted the email without responding.

*

There are days when I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and I cannot describe the expression on my face. It isn't a smile. It isn't a frown, either. Instead, the corners of my mouth are casually pulled back in neither a smile nor a frown. Nothing else about my face has changed, but there is something reassuring me that I don't have to smile, that I owe no one a smile, and maybe, just maybe, it is time to take back those small muscles in my face from a culture that says yes, because you are who you are, you must smile.

You owe us your smile.

It can't be that bad.

It is in those moments where the cracks turn into breaks, and I can either walk away or stay a while to watch the crumbling.

Not In Bed

I can tell when one is coming. It sneaks up behind me in a fit of confusion, right behind my eyes, prepared to settle in a blind spot.

When a migraine begins, I have found myself in any number of places: the grocery store, the classroom, on my couch, in a hotel room after a long day of travel, or on the edge of my bed as I start a new morning. The first sign is a sense of fuzziness behind my eyes and under my forehead, the same pins-and-needles feeling I feel in my feet or hands after I've been in one position for too long. The onset of my migraines makes the world intimidating, a place I have learned to prepare for when the grocery store suddenly gets confusing, when I can't handle the conversation in a classroom, or when I stand in front of the bathroom mirror in the mornings with my toothbrush in one hand and the toothpaste in the other, failing to make the connection between the two objects and our shared presence.

I don't remember a time in my life when I haven't had migraines or, at the very least, headaches. As a child, my mom's and my teachers' first responses were to have my eyes checked. One day at the end of a mid-October school day in third grade, my mom picked me up and took me to the eye doctor, the one inside of the Sears department store, to try on my new glasses with tiny versions of Snoopy and Woodstock printed on the frames. For a while, I felt like I had new eyes and a new head. I still got headaches, though. I was diagnosed with seasonal allergies two years later that, it turns out, weren't seasonal. My family doctor gave me antihistamines, but I'm not sure they did anything. The nightly fights with my mom about taking the pills in any way, from swallowing them with water to hidden in cheese to crushed up in a spoonful of applesauce, caused another set of headaches. Until my mom came home from the pharmacy with the tablets that dissolved on my tongue, the ones that tasted kind of minty, I sat and suffered because of my own doing. If I didn't say anything, then the headaches didn't exist, and if the headaches didn't exist, then I wouldn't have to swallow pills, right?

My migraines got worse during my freshman year of high school, which fourteen-year-old me spent partially in bed after a cocktail of school, band practice, sports practice, and homework caused my brain to just – stop. It felt as though my gray matter lost the ability to function, as if it were a car whose breaks were stuck in a position that prevented the car from moving. The muscles around my eyes would spasm, and the only thing I could do was stay in my bed with tears streaming down my face. I fell asleep at some point, only to wake up the next morning at six o'clock sharp and get ready for school, knowing that the new day would be a repeat of the one before. There was no stopping, no taking days or a week to lie in bed until the migraine subsided, because even at fourteen years old, I knew that staying in bed was not possible. I knew I had to go to school and do exceptionally well so I could get the scholarships to help me pay for college. My mom couldn't afford to take a week off work to stay home with me to nurse a migraine. My dad left for work before I woke up. If I were able to simply stay home and ride out the wave of migraine, I would be alone.

The final verdict came after a school year of doctors, appointments, specialists, an MRI, a CT scan in a mobile trailer because the children's hospital was under renovation: chronic atypical migraines. At fourteen, I had a form of migraine typically diagnosed in women between the ages of 30 and 50.

According to the American Migraine Association, people with typical migraines have symptoms that usually follow a particular cycle of phases, starting with the prodrome phase, when the well-known warning signs of a migraine take place: sensitivity to light and sound, irritability, and fatigue. The prodrome phase can also include difficulty speaking, reading, concentrating, or sleeping, which means the world feels like it's been turned upside down. The prodrome phase then gives way to the classic migraine aura, which then leads to the headache. Finally, the migraine concludes with the postdrome phase, which ushers a return of some symptoms that signaled the beginning of the headache and, according to some medical sources, lasts up to three days after the pain has subsided. I wonder what it's like to know what is coming next and be able to prepare for it. These are not the migraines I have.

What causes these migraines, the atypical ones – my migraines?

"It could be any number of things," a specialist said. "It could be diet. It could be stress. It could be allergies. Or, she could just have what we call a 'migraine personality' that makes her more prone to migraine headaches than the average person." I've since thought of other potential reasons. The weight of my hair straining my head and neck. Hormonal imbalances. Vitamin deficiencies. Sudden changes in the weather. The fact that it's Tuesday. Poor karma from a past life. It could be any number of things that, two decades after diagnosis, I still try to pinpoint.

I've also tried other solutions. Taking vitamins before bed. Haircuts. Yoga. Dietary changes. Different settings on my computer. Blue light filers in my glasses. Daith piercings in both of my ears to supposedly stimulate acupuncture points. My migraines still come and go as they please.

My atypical migraines seem well-suited for me, a writer, in that they make this phenomenon concise in a way that optimizes the impact the migraine has on my body. The pain starts to bloom about half of an inch above my eyebrows, and if I don’t have my hands full, I can usually cup the epicenter of the migraine in the palm of my hand. If I’m careful and react quickly, two ibuprofen tablets and a lot of cold water to drink will stop the migraine enough that I can continue to function, albeit miserably. If I don’t act fast enough, I then cycle through the prodrome, aura, and headache phases simultaneously. I have failed to ward off the cartoon caveman and his club, and the world becomes a confusing place that I need to escape to recover, but usually cannot run from right away.

I knew there were exceptions. One of my younger sisters has migraines worse than mine. She spent her sixth birthday in the hospital after having a migraine while we ate lunch at McDonald’s two days prior. It started with her not being able to pick up her chicken nuggets. The dropped nuggets and fries from her Happy Meal quickly progressed into what looked like an almost-six-year-old child having a stroke, which meant lunch turned into an emergency room visit, a transfer to the children’s hospital 45 minutes away with her screaming while EMTs administered pain medication intravenously in the back of an ambulance, and a three-day hospital stay.

I thought my sister and I were exceptions until I was in college and first read Joan Didion’s essay “In Bed.” It was the first time I had encountered another woman writing about her migraines. I was used to dealing with my migraines in private, but it felt like a different kind of private than what Didion describes. Her experiences in “In Bed” manifest themselves in the way she responds to an age-old question: Do you have headaches? Never? Sometimes? Frequently? Didion herself checked *sometimes*, which she admitted was a lie.

I ask myself – how does one choose an answer to that question and still have a life to live?

I wonder about the act of disclosure in these instances. The possibilities of a life where I could freely talk about my migraines without skeptical looks or comments intrigues me. I wonder about the possibility of not blurring the lines between public and private. I wonder if the fuzziness between shared and secret makes suffering that much worse. I think about these statements instead of making them questions, because in all honesty, I don't know if having the answers makes asking these questions any easier.

Each time I read Didion's essay, though, and catch a glimpse of how another woman, someone who I hadn't spent my thirty-ish years of life watching as they popped pain relievers and went on with their life had learned how to cope, I find this portrayal of migraines on a page to be a source of relief and frustration.

How was it that Didion's migraines were different enough from my own that she could retire to bed several days a month? I found myself suffering in classrooms, in rehearsals and practices, or as a college student on the bottom bunk of my room in my residence hall while the fire alarm blared to signal a fire drill during migraine episodes. Or was it not the migraines themselves that were all that different, but instead the lives we live? The world has changed since Didion and her migraines.

Maybe the migraines themselves weren't all that different.

I cannot allow myself to simply go to bed when I have a migraine. Why do I force myself forward even when it feels impossible? Why do I struggle with letting my body rest when its equilibrium has been disrupted? Maybe, just maybe, this is about erasure. The fear of having my pain invalidated by those who can't see the source of my suffering, who don't understand the source of what ails me, keeps me from just going to bed when a migraine hits. In retrospect, it makes sense that this became a mode of self-preservation from a childhood in which my father reminded my sisters and me that "if you can't see blood, then you aren't hurt." I was taught to erase my own pain before I could fully understand what that pain was capable of.

I also wonder if, in part, I am too stubborn to admit that I am in pain at all.

This back and forth and circling around and around through this knotty mess of stubbornness and symptoms, endurance and erasure keeps playing over and over again until I feel trapped in this perceived inability to break away from the world and just – be. Stubbornness has its limits, though. When stubbornness runs out, I wonder if the worry about being made invisible, of being on the edge of erasure, motivates me to keep going.

Are there ways in which people have erased the existence of migraines? Medically – no. Socially – yes. My observations of women popping pain relievers and moving on with their lives, of waiting until they are so sick that it is impossible to go anywhere except to bed, of forcing themselves into routines of barring themselves from rest until the house is spotless feels like something that is deeply rooted in a sense of toughness that some, by virtue of place or historical moment or economy, embody in a different way that makes going to bed as the default response to migraine easier.

Growing up, when my dad was at work, the only person around to take care of my sisters and me and the house and paying the bills and the cooking and cleaning and everything else that pertained to the home while also working full time and making sure that homework got done and we were picked up and dropped off at practices and meetings at the appropriate time while staying healthy and alive was my mom. It wasn't just my mother, but the women of the community I grew up in. There was always a line of women waiting to pick up underclassmen from band or sports practice. Women, our mothers, almost always signed up to contribute to bake sales or fundraisers. My peers and I almost always went to the women who took care of us when we needed help with homework.

A few of our fathers volunteered their time to chaperone the band busses on Friday nights or to coordinate classroom parties in primary school. Our fathers also worked long hours, usually doing manual labor, and then came home to either tend to the farm or take care of the animals or, as my father did, to sit in front of the television until it was time for bed. Many of our fathers were damaged by work, by war, or by both. The images that come to mind are the arthritic lumps on my father's hands. A friend's father who couldn't walk without a limp because he had been exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam. The fathers of my friends and classmates only knew how to parent with belts and threats.

The maintaining of social harmony fell upon women.

I am somewhat to blame for my inability to go to bed when I have a migraine, for enabling this cycle to continue. I would like to think that I could ask for help and not feel guilty about it. I know the world will keep spinning if I don't answer this question or say no, I can't. But the fear of what happens after I emerge from between the sheets and blankets, the fear of being seen as unable to endure, the fear of my pain being erased because of something that is very real but very much unseen is too big of a thing for me to squarely lay the blame solely on myself. I find myself wondering what will happen if something slips because I took to bed while my brain came crashing down around me. I learned this from the sideways glances or the sugary-sweet sympathetic tones when a peer missed a practice or barely made the band bus on Friday nights because, well, So-and-So had to make other arrangements. I learned what it looked like when women slipped up and forgot about dance practice or didn't show up to a concert or play or banquet. I know what that looks like for me. The frustrated sighs, the sense of panic I unwillingly absorbed, the sideways glances that said *why didn't you…*

I know what it looks like when they, when I, simply cannot summon the strength to do it due to every fiber of their being forcing them to *stop*.

I know what this looks like for me.

After the second round of two ibuprofen and even more water, my words begin to blur in my head. It becomes harder and harder to string sentences together. My skin pales. Sometimes I feel feverish, while other times I get the chills. I physically slow down because, if I stand up too quickly, I feel as if I could pass out. If needed, I press on, often because I don't have a choice or a chance to escape yet.

This is when I have another decision to make: to continue or to resort to other means. I weigh the consequences, to continue with the migraine or to end it before my body intended to, but to feel hung over, washed out, and bruised the next morning. If I am able, I would much rather go to bed.

I hold this heavy weight of knowing in my head. When I revisit Didion's essay time and time again, slowly turning those few pages marked by highlighter and pen, this is what I want to know from Didion:

How have migraines marked you?

I know how it has marked me.

I still eventually find myself sliding underneath the blankets. The ceiling fan and the small fan on my night table are on. The lights are off. I will not spend days in bed, but instead hours. In those hours in which I escape to allow my body or my medication to do the work it was built to do, a world exists outside that continues. I think of Didion, who describes her migraines as a blessing. I wonder where the blessing is in all of this and who that blessing is intended for.

I don’t think it is meant to be mine.

Erasing Memory of Skin

On the last weekend of a lower Midwest September, the only place I am comfortable is in my shower, surrounded by barely lukewarm water. I feel grimy, sweaty, as if I can't escape the stuff that has accumulated on my skin. The sweaty feeling is partially due to the weather outside and, in part, due to me trying to counteract the heat outside by making my apartment as cold as I can bear it. Pictures from the repairman show the unit's exhaust pipe from my air conditioning unit covered in ice, a solid tunnel of cold leading in the wrong direction.

As I stand under the shower head, I wonder what else I try washing away. Grime, sweat, dust. Dead skin cells. The heat of September threatens to spill over into October. Memories of touch just out of sight. In washing them away, I wonder, maybe I will be able to find some peace.

I run my purple sponge over the echoes of stretch marks and scars, so faded that I can barely see them anymore. I inch closer to the water flowing from the shower head and look down at the rest of my body. The echoes of touch linger, too, and I wonder how long they will last. I don't consider how long they will last.

I wonder just how one does erase the memory of skin, echoes ringing through layers, remembered in cells.

*

Lately, I find myself drawn to Maggie Nelson's book-length essay *Bluets*, a collection of 240 loosely linked fragments that meditate on the color blue. This is neither the first nor the only time this book has intrigued me, but there's something in Nelson's words that feeds a part of me attempting to push away an all-encompassing sadness.

Each time I sit or flop or collapse onto my couch and reach for *Bluets*, its slim volume lying in a pile of books on the back of my couch, I return to the same sections. Fragments 195-208. The first in this series that draws my attention is Nelson writing about displacement. “Does an album of written thoughts perform a similar displacement, or replacement,” she writes, “of the ‘original’ thoughts themselves?”

When I feel adrift – displaced from a healthy body, a partner, a lover – I wonder what my album of written thoughts would look like. *Is this a displacement*, I think to myself, *or is it simply a replacement?*

*

I wake up Monday morning and I see the red scaly patches that sometimes appear in the corners of my chin. I have yet to figure out why they show up, but their tightness pulls at the edges and I scratch. Picking at dried cells makes the skin underneath ooze, and the redness and plaque spread. Not far, but enough that I feel the discomfort. I fear that others can see it, too, but I can’t stop myself from picking at it. The only remedy is to let the redness disappear so I no longer see the difference between normal and not, and once those boundaries fall apart, then I find myself starting to heal.

This time, though, was different.

*

It’s been over twenty years since Dr. Gary Chapman published his book *Five Love Languages*, which looks at the five general ways in which people express their love for others. There must be a reason that Chapman’s work has endured. Maybe it’s that we see something of value in the ways in which we express our feelings, even if those expressions can lead to the destruction of the relationships we try so hard to build.

As I read through descriptions of Chapman's five love languages, I already know how I convey my feelings to others. I'm not fluent in gift giving, which often makes me anxious and develop multiple plans to find *exactly* the perfect gift, for which often there is no tangible match for the ideal I have concocted in my head. Nor do my feelings translate into the language of service by doing things for the person I love. I try, but I try too hard.

*

The next day, Tuesday, I scratch my forehead while getting ready for the day. As I pull my hand away, I inspect my fingernails. A stark white powder almost the color of my nails is lodged in the space between fingertip and nail.

It's not day-old make up. That powder is my skin, so dry that my forehead is turning to dust.

My skin screams for something but for some reason my body and I no longer speak the same language. My skin cries, but I stand in the wind wearing earmuffs.

After class on Tuesday afternoon, I decide to spend my feelings, a complicated mix of dread and loneliness. I go to the local sporting goods store and buy the most expensive travel mug I've ever purchased, followed by a trip to Target to buy my favorite kind of tea that I only buy as a treat.

At home, I pour scalding hot water into the travel mug, one batch to rinse the inside of the purple and gray contraption out and a second to make tea. I know a sickness is coming on because I usually only drink hot tea when I'm not feeling well. I drop two tea bags in the mug. The herbal blend smells citrusy and spicy as it steeps and makes my apartment cozy. About a half hour later, I come back and take a deep gulp from my new mug, forgetting its promise to keep hot drinks hot for up to twelve hours.

I open my mouth as I sit my tea back on the kitchen counter to let the heat escape. My tongue feels scorched, its surface bearing the brunt of the damage.

When I am under stress, I crave acid and heat. Instead of chocolate or wine or ice cream, I want hot sauce, acidic fruit juices, iced tea with obscene amounts of lemon. By the time I wake up Wednesday morning, I have consumed so much acid that the tip of my tongue and the insides of my cheeks are speckled with the hard, white ulcers of a diet out of balance. The tip of my tongue has three or four that make it difficult to speak without pain.

*

Eleven days after that sweaty shower and two days after buying the travel mug, I wake up to clues that I am about to have one of the worst migraines of my life. My classmates that afternoon comment that I don't look well, that I just look worn out. A half hour into class, the pressure in my head is so great that I can't feel the touch of my hand I use to hold up my head. I suffer through the rest of my two-and-a-half-hour seminar, refuse a ride home from a friend, and I am in bed by four in the afternoon. I don't wake up until seven the next morning, oversleeping my alarm by an hour.

When I sit up the next morning, my skin screams. I don't know what is wrong with me, but I can't move without pain. I feel my stomach revolt as I try to sit at my desk long enough to send an email cancelling the class I teach. I choke down some breakfast and barely force some orange juice down. This level of unwell reaches new heights. I go back to bed and sleep most of the weekend away, but no matter what I do, the physical pain in my skin refuses to quit.

I call the doctor's office Monday morning and ask for an appointment. The receptionist tells me that I have a pick of any appointment time after eleven that morning in twenty-minute increments. By the time I get to the health center that afternoon, a piece of skin on the inside of my thigh has ruptured and is slowly oozing a thick, vile-smelling gunk that could only be described as having the smell of disease and cabbage. This doctor says they're not equipped to help me here, my university's student health center, and that they've already called the emergency room at the university's women and children's hospital. "They're expecting you," she says.

I hobble to my car with directions written on a notepad with some kind of pharmaceutical name printed on the top.

The physician's assistant in the emergency room confirms what the doctor at student health suspected: skin infection. The vile-smelling lump on my inner thigh is an abscess caused by the infection and was likely triggered by my massive migraine and all the time I spent in bed, under the blankets, with a body too overwhelmed to fight the infection off. As the assistant pokes and prods around the lump, I react to the various degrees of pain. A firm grip on one part of my skin near the abscess has caused me to dig my nails into the cushion-covered examining table. She sighs and shakes her head, telling the nurse that it's no wonder I'm in pain. As she drains and packs the abscess, she tells me she's in deep, measuring the now hollow pocket of skin in inches. "If you had even waited until tomorrow to come in," the physician's assistant says as she pushed more bandaging into the open wound, “this probably would’ve been an overnight stay. You would’ve most likely been septic.”

Afterward, I get cleaned up and dressed. The nurse comes back with my discharge papers, a prescription for pain killers, and two more prescriptions specifically for skin infections. The nurse also hands me two creams: one to repair my skin and another to form a barrier to prevent further damage. I am free to go and slowly make my way back to my car, hoping that I can get myself home before the first round of painkillers really kicks in and numbs everything, skin and bones and mind.

I barely make it home in time and have to call a friend to take me to the pharmacy to fill my prescriptions. “Why didn’t you call me sooner?!” she asks as we’re standing in my living room and my foggy brain tries to remember where I put my phone. My friend touches my shoulder, directing me towards my phone in plain sight on the coffee table. The way I tense at the feeling of her touch on my shoulder gives a clear message that the pain killers only work so much.

“It’s okay. I can do this,” I say. I need to give myself the pep talk because my skin feels so foreign. I need something to be normal when, clearly, there wasn’t much normalcy to be had lately.

*

Chapman’s fifth love language is the one in which I am most fluent, touch. I am a hands-on, interactive person who needs to feel the concreteness of the world around me. I learn best by touching and doing. I express love by holding hands, by snuggling on the couch and curling up next to someone while I sleep. In some ways, my skin’s need for touch and to touch others is barely satisfied, so much so that, when it isn’t possible for me to give a hug or curl up next to a lover, I often find myself rolled up in blankets or picking the softest sweaters out of my closet so that sensation of fibers against my skin brings comfort.

But when your skin doesn't cooperate, as it couldn't in that long shift from September to October, it's hard to speak one's native language when what I want to say is not what my body wants to hear. Sometimes the effects of that language become impossible to erase, no matter how hard I scrub every inch of me.

I, too, ask the same question Maggie Nelson poses in those fragments I return to over and over again. "In which case," she writes in Fragment 203, "how does one know when, or how, to refuse? How to recover?"

*

Fragment 203. Nelson has somehow moved from rivers to memory, from the Disney movie *Fantasia* to, in this fragment, drugs in the 1980s. But these moves are so graceful, so artfully balanced, that I don't mind that I am whisked from something natural to simulation to stimulant.

I wonder what else lives on in our systems forever, whether they be the highs of love or the stings of trauma, the curses of history or the ever stretching reaches of desire, that seep into our bones, settle in our marrow, and begin to bump against our cells as they are thought to be born anew, but instead rising to the surface of our skin, banged and scarred and bruised.

*

While I am sick, I take a lot of showers. There is more at stake now. I am not only trying to wash the memories of the day to day from my skin, but also the infection that makes me feel untouchable even though I am not contagious.

I finish my antibiotics on a Thursday morning twenty-five days after my air conditioning unit stopped working. I shed my pajamas, get ready for my morning shower, and as I look down at my stomach, there are small red spots on my skin. I wonder what they're from. Maybe I'm having a reaction to the new bottle of shower gel, but I still hop in the shower and wash myself with what could be the offending blue-tinted body wash.

Throughout the day, the spots spread. The skin on the palms of my hands bubbles up beneath the surface. Red bumps that don't itch or burn or ooze or hurt show up on my hands. A plaque-like rash appears on my abdomen under my belly button. I go home and cry because I want my skin to be back to normal. I look up my symptoms and call the pharmacy. I tell the pharmacist on the phone what I've gone through for almost a month and what I was prescribed. "Well, to be honest, skin rashes are a side effect of both of the antibiotics you were given. Since you've been taking both of those drugs together, this is definitely a reaction. It's harmless and should go away in a few days."

"Okay, but how do I treat it?"

"Benadryl and, if you think you need it, some hydrocortisone cream. To be honest, though, unless it's bothering you, leaving it alone works just as fine, too."

I spend the rest of the weekend popping antihistamines and using hydrocortisone cream like it is hand lotion. The rash bothers me, as does the rest of my skin as of late, but not in the way that the pharmacist had in mind.

As I swallow another dose of allergy medicine and rub my body with cortisone cream, two more medicines that replaced the two antibiotics, skin repair cream, and barrier cream assigned to my infection, I wonder what it will take to erase other memories from my skin. Will I have to shed like a snake, rubbing myself against the ground until my entire outer layer is left behind, a delicate and crisp netting used to contain me, but is no longer adequate? The thought scares me because I am terrified of snakes. I take every opportunity I can to hide from them.

I wonder if the only possible solution is to shed every piece of skin from my skeleton, epidermis all the way down to the tissues lying beneath the skin. A complete reset, a new skin, seems to be the only way to completely erase what is haunting me.

A complete reset, however, is not possible without death. I, too, ask the same question Maggie Nelson poses in those fragments I return to when I'm trying to figure out how I'm supposed to navigate this new reality. "In which case," she writes in Fragment 203, "how does one know when, or how, to refuse? How to recover?"

*

On top of the scrubbing and infections and rashes and pain, my weight refuses to stabilize. By the time the rashes show up, I have lost a hair under twenty-five pounds in just ten weeks. My skin no longer feels like it fits me.

*

I wonder if Chapman's love languages have room for dialects. I wonder if the ways in which I touch communicate are a variation of the language that everyone around me speaks. I cuddle, snuggle, hug, lean my head on someone's shoulder. I find most touches to be soothing, comforting, reassuring.

Languages do have dialects, though. Not everyone feels the same way about being touched as I do. Even I have my limits. A touch from someone I do not trust makes me flinch. I do not want to be in the center of a crowded room because of the chance of unknown skin coming in contact with mine.

Of course, there are also forms of touch that are not soothing, not comforting, not reassuring. Those are memories of touch I bury deep in my memory out of worry and fear of what they might do to me in the present or in the future.

Sometimes, it feels like the equivalent of everyone speaking in words while I am conversing in colors.

*

The last remnant of shedding my skin and what ails it is two bands of a thick, rough plaque, one on the inside of each thigh. I lightly scratch my skin to try to loosen them enough so they'll peel. My old skin comes off in chunks.

I wonder what all my body is trying to shed. The infection? The rash? The reaction to the antibiotics? Something else entirely? Maybe, all four?

I inspect the topography of these pieces of plaque, some of which are tiny and some of which are almost the size of a dime. They're lumpy and bumpy and rough on both sides. Nothing about them is smooth or indicates an ease with which they formed. To me, their surfaces indicate trauma, internal and external, and though this trauma is a pittance, something about my surface has noticeably changed. The ridges on the cap of the orange juice bottle dig in and hurt more than they did in the past. Hot dish water is almost unbearable, but necessary to get my dishes clean. I find myself scratching more than before.

I hold the pieces of my skin in the palm of my hand before throwing them in the bathroom trashcan. They are darker than my skin has ever been, and I wonder if it's the medicines or remnants of the infection or memories haunting me.

When I visit my family in Ohio for Thanksgiving, my skin is still shedding. Particularly, the skin on my hands refuses to stop peeling, but the pieces that lift themselves from the layers underneath become smaller and smaller each time a new layer of skin is exposed to the air. I see it as progress.

I have lived with my skin long enough to know what it does and has done. In light of the layers of cells and plaques, of memories infused in my skin, language and runes and the faintest essence of touches that made the world shiver, I wonder how much progress I can make until one of two things happens: I return to stability or dissolve.

*

I'm not sure if this new skin, young and tender, is a displacement or a replacement. Recovery comes slowly, like the creeping of the sunrise.

I'm still not sure if I have washed away what triggered the unease that accompanied all of this and, if I have, it is not something that I am willing to share. Maybe my skin has simply shed enough – enough memory, enough infection – that it has sloughed that script off my body. Maybe it was all the showers. Maybe it was just simply the "fundamental impermanence of all things" that meant I never had a chance to hold on to whatever is no longer mine.

Small changes in the surface or the appearance of my skin cause me to worry. I still hear the warning about sepsis when I insist that whatever is ailing me is minor because I have set a precedent for a serious ailment. Instead of being there -- something to watch and touch and hold my body together -- my skin requires more from me. Sometimes, it just whispers. Sometimes, it demands attention loudly.

I wonder if my skin will continue to be so sensitive, so vulnerable, forever. I wonder if the “fundamental impermanence of all things” includes what can’t be seen. Permanence is too much to put together in that moment of heightened awareness of something like skin, something constantly creating and erasing itself. The memories, the sensations, the hauntings. I think about this as I recoil from the things that didn’t used to make my skin hurt, as I shake my hand to try and rid of that feeling.

Foot Traffic

I had been in a simmering existential predicament since the announcement broke two weekends ago. Payless, the shoe store, was going out of business, closing not only all its brick-and-mortar stores but also its online presence, too. I looked at my go-to black ballet flats with the cute, tight pleats along the toe box, and noted the holes in the bottom of the shoes. I have a knack for doing that.

Central Missouri had been plagued with weeks upon weeks of blizzards, ice storms, and dangerously cold wind chills, so on the next reasonably decent weekend, I ventured out to the Payless at the local mall. I hoped to get some good deals, especially since their website advertised “up to 40% off!” as a thank you to the company’s customers. In the back of my mind, I calculated how many pairs of my black flats I could reasonably buy. After all, if I could get a deal, what would be so bad about having a few extra pairs of shoes in my closet? That is not what I saw.

This store was *a mess*.

Though there was still some structure to the chaos, it was clear that the store had been picked over and, given the rainy weather outside, overwhelmed. One woman stood behind the counter and, after every transaction, took out her cell phone and sent pictures of the receipts to her manager. I imagine the woman behind the counter took pictures of receipts to send to her boss, who may have been keeping track of sales figures on their day off or while attending to other business. Another young man ran frantically around the store, reaching for boxes on the top shelves and helping customers find what they needed. I slid my way into the store undetected and started to look around.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should probably put this out there.

I. Hate. Shoes.

I have hated shoes for as long as I can remember. From fifth grade until my senior year of high school, I wore a size nine and a half wide, women's. I don't remember an age where I wore shoes in a child's size; I know I did at some point, but those times were before I was actively aware of these kinds of things. High school sports were not kind to my feet, and by the time I put on my cap and gown for graduation, I was sliding my feet into a size ten wide. When the shoe industry decides that a woman who wears anything bigger than a nine must either be elderly, frumpy, or solely wear black non-skid work shoes because her feet have been categorized as excessive and unladylike, she quickly begins to hate anything that goes on her feet. Including socks, which at a size ten, either just barely fit or are so big that they slide off.

In some ways, I did not inherit a knack for things like shoe shopping, for wearing makeup, or really for buying things that are meant to accompany the clothes I wear. My mother has never owned make-up and has three pairs of shoes: her good sneakers, her working-in-the-yard sneakers, and her black non-skid work shoes. At one point, my mom had a fourth pair of shoes, a pair of Mary Jane-esque dress shoes to wear when it seemed that, every summer, someone was graduating or getting married, but they have since disappeared. Her mother never wore make-up and only wore tennis shoes; Grandma's eczema and diabetes made many of those decisions for her. My grandma on my dad's side of the family wasn't much different, but not because of her health. Along with the color of my hair and eyes, among other traits, I've inherited a strong tendency toward the practical instead of the pretty.

There is a cultural heritage, too, that not only emphasizes women's shoes but also their feet. When someone with a large shoe collection comes up in conversation, Imelda Marcos, the wife of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, comes to mind. So does Carrie Bradshaw, one of the main characters in the hit television series *Sex and the City*; her collection of high-end designer shoes is believed to have cost $40,000 at the time the show was set. Then there are the "Chicks with Kicks," the Peters sisters from South Florida who collectively own over 6,000 pairs of sneakers that have an estimated worth of over $2 million.

But there's more to this than just shoes. Women and their feet have been the focus of cultural practices for centuries. Women in China underwent foot binding for centuries, a practice that was still in place up until 1950. Foot binding is a practice where women had bones in their feet broken, their toes curled under, and their feet bandaged to keep them small. Foot binding altered the way women walked, too, forcing them to take tiny steps, creating a frail-looking gait. In India, it is common practice to touch the feet of elders to indicate respect and humility.

More broadly, society and culture have made links between the size of women's feet and their level of attractiveness. Anthropologist Daniel Fessler writes in *Scientific American* that foot size has long been associated with attractiveness in many cultures, although Fessler notes the correlation does not make sense from an anthropological or evolutionary standpoint because larger feet would, in theory, mean that those women are more stable on their feet and less likely to fall while pregnant. That theory would suggest that women with bigger feet should be more attractive than they are portrayed to be in some non-Western, male-dominated societies.

Shoe manufacturers also contribute to the mistreatment of women's feet. The dangers of wearing high heels for prolonged periods of time have been known for a while, with the angle that women force their feet into so they can wear the shoes causing all kinds of pain and altering the way a woman walks. Fessler writes that, on top of the damage that heels inflict on a woman's body, heels alter a woman's gait in a way that Western societies view as sexy and feminine. When women walk in heels, they take smaller and more frequent steps and rotate and tilt their hips more while bending their hips and knees less.

Additionally, Molly Longman, a wellness reporter and distance runner reports for *Refinery29* that women's sneakers aren't designed for women's feet. Women's feet and men's feet are shaped differently, but many leading manufacturers of sneakers use molds of men's feet to design women's shoes. Not only are women's feet shaped differently, but the bodily mechanics of women running are different than that of men running, which causes differences in injuries, as well. Women's feet tend to be flatter and wider in the forefoot, or the part of the foot by a person's toes, and narrower in the heel than men's feet. This also changes the mechanics of how women move differently than men, meaning that women are more likely to suffer from instability of the pelvis, patellofemoral pain syndrome, and stress fractures. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to experience problems with tendons and knee cartilage. In an interview with Harvard researcher Dr. Casey Kerrigan, Longman walks us through the shoe-making process and the latter's failure to find a sneaker that fits her feet without causing an array of injuries. Kerrigan notes that men and women suffer different kinds of running injuries, adding, “it’s poorly designed footwear that’s causing more and different ones [in women]."

In other words, women have two choices when it comes to their feet. Women can either wear shoes that damage and further sexualize their bodies, or women can wear shoes that masquerade as offering a better sense of comfort, but in doing so, risk moving in ways that are perceived, as Fessler writes, as being more masculine in shoes that were most likely not designed for a woman’s foot.

In the store, I braced myself as I looked at what was left of the furry moccasins I had just discovered around Christmas, setting myself up for the disappointment that I knew would soon hit me. Seeing nothing in a size ten on the shelf, I pulled a box marked nine and a half off the shelf and tried squeezing my foot into the dusty rose slipper shoe, the kind just soft enough to wear around the house but looked just enough like an actual shoe to wear out in public. My foot would only go so far. The ugly stepsister of this shelf, of the furry moccasin, I moved on and wondered if there was even anything left for me to look at.

There was. Boxes and boxes of riding boots that I knew I could never squeeze into because, as my dad says, I have the calf muscles of a professional football player. I guess that’s what walking around college campuses all day will do for you, but the comparison to a professional football player unnerves me. His comments about my body are never packaged as what most people would consider to be compliments, and every one of them works to downplay or downgrade my femininity to make a statement.

I looked at the pairs and pairs of high heel shoes that lined the store shelves. There were wedges left over from summer – who knows how to walk in those things, anyway? – and espadrilles galore. I glanced at the black non-skid work shoes that I'd spent thirteen years of my life buying and replacing when I worked fast food to put me through college and two graduate degrees. Come on, shoe store – were there no black flats to be found?

There is a reason why I couldn't find the furry moccasins, the riding boots, or any shoes in my size. Most shoe manufacturers start to reduce their offerings – or stop offering shoes altogether – around a size nine. BBC News cites several reasons for this, most of them having to do with the production of shoes. As more and more shoes are made in Asia, with many of them also being designed in Asia, outsourcing has caused shoe sizes to shrink. The cost of manufacturing and shipping larger shoes increases as well. Aesthetics also plays a role because, like many other notions we've internalized to be true, smaller shoes look prettier than bigger shoes.

I have yet to understand the association of a love for shoes with femininity. American consumerism puts so much emphasis on women's shoes. Studies have shown that women will purchase, on average, 270 pairs of shoes in their lifetimes, each pair costing around $53. I can't even think of 270 shoes that I have liked enough to consider taking them home. My $65 pink and white Adidas athletic shoes were relics from my sophomore year of college in 2006. Those survived until mid-June of 2019, when the bottom of the left shoe fell off on my way to hear the governor of Ohio speak at a summer leadership program I teach for. Society has all sorts of "rules" associated with what women wear on their feet and when and how that it all feels unnecessary to me. Rules for shoes at work, rules for shoes before and after certain holidays, rules for when in the day a person should buy shoes, rules for *how* to buy shoes – to me, this is borderline crazy. I wonder how many of these rules are still relevant today. It's not hard to find pages and pages of rules for buying and wearing shoes on the internet, but so many of these rules are dependent on their followers having the time, money, and ability to commit to adhering to standards of fashion and society. Not to mention a whole bunch of other factors that contribute to how a person thinks about, purchases, and wears shoes.

In the store, I finally spotted the familiar red and white box. I grabbed two pairs of my flats off the shelf, which I could justify since, at forty percent off, it was almost like getting a pair for free.

As I made my way to the register, I took one more glance at the furry moccasin slippers, just in case someone had put back a pair in my size. No such luck. As I stood in line and waited to pay, parents tried to corral toddlers and small children into the kids' section to have their feet sized. Older women shuffled around the store, looking at earrings and commenting on the deals they found. Handbags and matching shoes sat on shelves at the end of each aisle. The bright fluorescent lighting shined off the white walls and fixtures in a tempting way. I imagined if I listened closely, I could hear the remaining merchandise whisper, "Buy me!" I wondered how long these two pairs would last before I, once again wore them until I destroyed them.

It was finally my turn to pay and, as the cashier rang up my shoes, I added two pairs of cushion inserts to my total – which, I thought to myself, were useless since they would each only last about a month – and thought that, well, if these were the last of these shoes I ever wore, I might as well take care of my feet. I swiped my debit card and gathered my bag to walk out of this shoe store for the last time. I caught a glimpse of the cashier taking a picture of my receipt before she called on the next person in line. It's as if society and culture didn’t have enough documentation regarding women, their feet, and what has been done and what we keep doing to them, that the addition of a picture of my receipt was needed as proof that yes, another woman was here buying shoes. I felt like the picture of my receipt, along with all of the other pictures of receipts I saw the sales person take that day, only further confirmed notions about women that I, quite honestly, didn’t want to be a part of. I just wanted to pay for my shoes and go home.

I never wore the shoes I bought that day.

Payless started its going out of business sale just after I had bought myself a birthday present: a nice and expensive pair of shiny rose gold flats I found online. I had *never* spent that much on a pair of shoes.

But my feet felt so much better in them.

Those black flats? Well, they sat on the shoe rack in my bedroom until the pandemic winter of 2021, still wrapped in white tissue paper with “American Eagle by Payless” stamped on it. I found myself in a fit of cleaning and purging my living space because there comes a point where small spaces contain too much *stuff*. Living in as small of an apartment as I did, clutter builds up quickly enough that, by the time that I realize clutter isn’t just clutter anymore, the walls feel like they’re starting to close in. I only have a limited amount of space in which to live, so I am regularly evaluating just how many objects I really do need in my home.

I started pulling pairs of shoes off the shoe rack. The heels I’d bought from Payless shortly after I graduated from college and hadn’t worn in five years, went into the donation bag. The Old Navy flip-flops too. A pair of shoes that kind of looked like Keds sneakers but that I don’t remember buying went into the bag. I picked up the red and white boxes that had sat for so long that, in my hands, they felt like the dust had not only collected but fused into the cardboard itself.

I opened the lid and looked at the shoes, lying in their tissue paper, waiting for someone to wear them. The shoes I'd bought just in case, because shoe companies say it is more expensive to make shoes that fit me and others who wear larger shoes. These were flats that failed to make my gait sexier. They were practical: function over fashion. More and more knowledge of what shoes try to do to my feet gathered as I remembered that my shoes were the first thing I kicked off when I walked in the door of my apartment. That I would rather feel grass or carpet or even dirt touching the bottoms of my feet than the sole of a shoe. The dust-infused boxes at the bottom of my shoe rack reinforced the knowledge that I hated shoes, those objects that not only felt like a restrictive nuisance but were also made for me in a way that prompted me to spend money. They were not made for my body and the way it moved.

Unfortunately, I thought to myself as I took the shoes out of their boxes and put them in the donation bag, I am not the person for these shoes. They might be for someone else's feet, but not mine.

Field Notes on What Adorns Us:

A Case Study

Purpose: to examine approaches and attitudes to bodily adornment, how people adorn their bodies and why, and personal reasons for body modification.

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on a single subject. [SUBJECT] is a cis-gendered woman in her early to mid-thirties. [SUBJECT] is a writer who has chosen to remain anonymous. She is described as around average height, heavyset, with brown hair, blue eyes, and glasses. [SUBJECT] was diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) at the age of twenty-nine, which impacts how [SUBJECT] views her body. She has admitted to having at least one instance of adornment in two of the three categories examined in this study. She has considered acquiring adornments in the third category. These categories include piercings, scars, and tattoos.

[SUBJECT] is currently writing about femininity and the body. This study will make connections between [SUBJECT]'s experiences and attitudes towards adornment as well as her creative interests. Additionally, this study will examine scholarly views on what I have termed as adornment but is more widely known as body modification.

Body modification is of particular interest to this researcher. This researcher has multiple roles in this case study, as this researcher is also [SUBJECT,] the person whose experiences support this study. This researcher has an interest in other people's body modifications, especially tattoos. Additionally, this researcher is trying to connect personal and academic research in a way that situates [SUBJECT]'s experiences within a greater context.

BACKGROUND

Scholarship has not always been friendly to the idea of body modification. Poet and therapist Kathleen Del Mar Miller cites scholars of body modification and somatechnics who have labeled the act of body modification as a hostile act directed at oneself out of hate or spite. Del Mar Miller references Nikki Sullivan, a scholar of body modification and somatechnics, as describing bodily adornment as extra-analytic; in other words, modifications to the body's flesh can be seen and commented on but are not available for analytic inquiry. In this case, body modification is an aesthetic trend to be viewed as either splendorous or monstrous, where meaning is over inscribed or non-existent. In this line of thinking, tattoos and body piercings are compared to hairstyles or cuts of pants, in which their cultural relevance and value is more about being pleasing to the eye than anything else.

British independent scholar Kay Inckles cites psychiatry and criminology as fields that also view body piercing, tattooing, and scaring as a pathology. In this theory, if a person in a dualistic society, such as western societies, has piercings, tattoos, or scars, then there must be a pathology behind those modifications because such behavior deviates from western societal expectations and norms regarding how a body looks and acts. In the past, these adornments of the body and other forms of body modification have often been associated, at least in western thought, with primitivism or with countercultures. This is a contentious association when looking at how primitive or pathology has been defined and those definitions' relationships to normativity.

These conclusions, however, are not representative of all fields of academic study. Anthropological research provides several perspectives on body modification in cultures around the globe that counter previously mentioned ideas about body modification. Scholar MC Taylor, who studies religious philosophy, argues that the cultural renaissance of tattooing in the 1980s was more than just a passing and trivial fad, but instead makes the case that the wider acceptance of tattooing is a significant change due to the power involved with the materiality of the body. In a world where more and more bodies are increasingly virtual, Taylor argues that body modification worked to undo the dematerialization of the human body by making the human body matter.

On the other hand, a common theme among those who have studied body modification is its relationship to memory. Marks on the body's surface become a symbolic second skin that is meant to cover and protect the physical skin of the body. This protection symbolizes the rebirth of an individual who is more empowered to live as an authentic self. This is because, as psychologist Suzanne B. Phillips writes in *Psychology Today*, tattoos and tattooing in particular offer six qualities associated with recovering from trauma. Phillips cites multiple instances in which survivors of trauma have used tattooing to create this symbolic second skin, including women tattooing over mastectomy scars, military veterans commemorating their service to their country, parents honoring children who died, or people working through their part in larger cultural traumas.

PIERCINGS

When asked about her piercings, [SUBJECT] disclosed the following list: first ear lobe piercings at age seven done at the Claire's in the mall, second ear lobe piercings done at age thirteen at the same Claire's in the same mall, helix piercing along the back curve of her left ear at age eighteen at the same Claire's in the same mall, navel at age eighteen when her friend also had an appointment for this piercing, the first nose piercing the same week as her nineteenth birthday at a studio on a state route out of the town where she went to college, the second nose piercing at age twenty-nine shortly before her PCOS diagnosis and starting to apply for Ph.D. programs, and both daith piercings shortly after turning thirty-one in a partial attempt to alleviate migraine and in part "just for the hell of it."

[SUBJECT] has had few problems with her piercings, except for the first nose piercing, which she was afraid to show her parents because of her dad's views that people with facial piercings are punks with faces like Swiss cheese. This meant [SUBJECT] took her nose ring out when she went home for one weekend a month to work so she could keep her summer job at McDonald's, which at that time required that employees remove all their facial piercings or cover them up. When home for spring break, she lost her nose ring in the carpet of her childhood bedroom and was without a replacement for a week. By the time [SUBJECT] got back to campus, her nose piercing had grown shut enough that she was not able to put new jewelry in the piercing. [SUBJECT]'s body and its acceptance of body piercings means that she has no scars or disfiguration from the rejection of piercings or jewelry.

[SUBJECT] admits that the second ear lobe piercing on her right ear was slightly botched, sometimes making it difficult to insert jewelry. She wishes she had known that getting pierced with a piercing gun at the mall is considered a blunt-force trauma injury because of the piercing gun's mechanics. Obviously, this is not a safe way to pierce anything, and [SUBJECT] now knows better. "I can see the draw to getting your ears pierced at the mall, though," [SUBJECT] notes:

> It's safe getting your ears pierced at the mall because it is comfortable for a lot of people. Tattoo shops have a certain reputation around them for a lot of people, even though more and more people have tattoos and piercings that aren't in their ears. But getting your ears pierced at the mall is also a kind of performance. The piercing station is usually right by the door or, worse yet, one of those kiosks on the concourse. Everyone can see what you're doing. Everyone can also hear you screaming if you aren't prepared for what's about to happen, too. It says something about you and your parents, but also tries to lessen the significance of what is happening. It's a way of saying, "hey, this child or adult is about to do something traumatizing to their body because it's also pretty, but that's okay – you can buy stuff or go get a pretzel in the food court after you're done!"

[SUBJECT] now only gets piercings done by professionals who know what they're doing. "It's just safer that way," she says, remembering how her cartilage crunched when the woman at the mall used a piercing gun on her helix

[SUBJECT] notes that she often "feels the itch" for a new piercing to mark the start or end of a period in her life. [SUBJECT] says that the ear lobe piercings are an exception that she asked for as a child because she wanted to be like her mom, which [SUBJECT] says that, as an adult, she sees as an early attempt at modeling femininity:

> I mean, all the women in my family had their ears pierced. Well, almost all of them, I think. But when you're used to seeing women with shiny things in their ears and you have don't, I think it's a natural impulse to want piercings, too. That goes for both sets of my ear lobe piercings – when I saw that my mom could wear *two* pairs of earrings at the same time, I wondered, well, why couldn't I do that, too?

The second nose piercing and her daith piercings marked slightly different occasions. "Honestly, I missed my nose piercing," [SUBJECT] said. "I was kind of attached to it. Sometimes, though, I just feel that I need a change. With my daith piercings, I had them done a couple of months after a serious breakup and I was in my last semester of taking classes as a student – like, last semester *ever* – and it felt like a lot in my life was shifting at that time."

In the future, [SUBJECT] is considering a forward helix piercing on her right ear since she was told her tragus, the small point of cartilage that hides the opening to the ear canal, is not big enough to survive a piercing. The forward helix, or a piercing of the outer rim of the ear, is said to be a rather painful piercing, which so far is why [SUBJECT] has not followed through with her plan – yet.

SCARS

[SUBJECT] admits to having a variety of scars and marks with varying degrees of visibility and intent. The earliest one [SUBJECT] remembers recognizing is on her left forearm, about two inches below her elbow. [SUBJECT] maintains that she was stung by a bee as a child and the sting left behind a dark spot about a third of the size of a quarter. [SUBJECT] says her mother claims that the spot has always been there, leaving [SUBJECT] to wonder if it is a scar or a birthmark and if classification really matters at all.

Over the course of our interview, [SUBJECT] revealed an accidental scar less visible than the mark on her arm. This scar is a result of spilling a large amount of boiling pasta water on her stomach while making dinner for Mother's Day when she was twenty-seven. "I was about to pour the pasta into the strainer I had in the sink," [SUBJECT] said, "and I thought I heard someone say my name. I was startled and the pasta water went all over my stomach. I've burned myself on accident a lot, but this one hurt the worst." Initially, [SUBJECT] said that the wound from the pasta water incident hurt so bad and blistered so much of her stomach that she could barely stand to feel clothes rubbing against the injury. As the blistering subsided and the scar rose shiny and new to the surface, [SUBJECT] claims that it might have been the funniest-looking scar she has had because it looked like a T Rex chasing bubbles. Since then, the scar has faded so much that it is barely visible.

Additional scars include a red splotch on [SUBJECT]'s right shoulder from a benign cyst, random freckles, spots of discoloration from acne, picked-at bug bites from childhood, and stretch marks on [SUBJECT]'s stomach. [SUBJECT] remarks that her stretch marks have a slightly holographic quality to them, which she suspects is a result of major shifts in her body shape over time: puberty; significant weight gain in her pre-teen and early teenage years that resulted in visits to a dietician and a prescription for

Metformin, a drug meant to control blood sugar, that her pediatrician kept increasing because [SUBJECT] wasn't losing weight fast enough; and the three years [SUBJECT] put her education and most of her career aspirations on hold after college to help care for her maternal grandmother, who had dementia and was increasingly limited in her mobility. [SUBJECT] reveals that her reaction to the second major shift in body shape also involved periods of drastically reducing the number of calories she consumed, which was self-inflicted, and that the third major shift was counteracted not only by the onset of the fitness tracker craze but also due to a proper diagnosis of PCOS and medication.

When I asked how she felt about these scars, [SUBJECT] remarked that she oscillates between indifference and feeling that her stretch marks sometimes make her feel monstrous. This researcher hypothesizes that this has a direct relationship not only to body image, but to a belated diagnosis of her PCOS and the impact that violent patriarchy has on a woman. Additionally, this researcher thinks that [SUBJECT]'s frustration and anger over repeated misunderstandings and blame directed at her adds to how [SUBJECT] thinks about her stretch marks. [SUBJECT] has heard plenty of times that she isn't trying hard enough. [SUBJECT] has tried, sometimes trying too hard in not the best of ways.

Although [SUBJECT] does not disclose details here, she mentions scars that are no longer or never were visible. Two of these scars were, [SUBJECT] admits, on her abdomen at the bottom of her ribcage from a particularly dark period in her teenage years. Others are mental or emotional scars. When asked for further information, [SUBJECT] says that these scars tend to fall into several different categories: disappointment, betrayal, repeated misunderstandings, varying forms of violence, and another that [SUBJECT] says, even with her specialized knowledge of words and language, is difficult to explain. To quote [SUBJECT], “Frustration isn’t strong enough of a word, but I’m not sure anger is the right word, either. It’s a mixture of both, I think. What makes it hard to think about is, somewhere along the way, ambivalence got tangled up in there, too. Probably as a defense mechanism, to be honest. If I don’t feel it, then it can’t keep hurting me – right?” [SUBJECT] acknowledges that this is not the most effective coping mechanism, nor does suppressing what bothers her prevent it from hurting her.

TATTOOS

Surprisingly, [SUBJECT] revealed during her interviews that she does not have tattoos. She is intrigued by them and appreciates other people’s tattoos but her indecisiveness about what she would want to be marked on her body for the rest of her life has prevented her from getting one. This is not the case for some of the women in her family. A maternal aunt has a small tattoo of a daisy on her foot. The older of [SUBJECT]’s two younger sisters has three tattoos, all on her feet: an elephant with its trunk reaching upward on the outside of her right ankle, in memory of their maternal grandmother; the word *travel* in English, French, and Italian, the three languages this sister speaks, on the inside of her left foot; and the tagline of this sister’s sorority, “Ever Forward,” punctuated with a sailboat, the sorority’s symbol, on the inside of her right foot. If [SUBJECT]’s sister stood like a ballerina in the first position, this sister’s tattoos would read, in translation, as “travel, travel, travel Ever Forward,” which [SUBJECT] thinks is “pretty cool.”

[SUBJECT] has a Pinterest board of potential tattoo ideas, most of which consist of flowers (particularly cherry blossoms,) elephants with their trunks raised, lotus flowers, references to books or poetry, or the Latin phrase *alis volat propriis*. [SUBJECT] appears drawn to tattoos of delicate flowers, as this Pinterest board also has examples of tattoos of wildflowers, daisies, and dandelions gone to seed. “I just like flowers,” [SUBJECT] commented. “There’s always a simplicity in how beautiful they are, and there’s something about flowers that are very natural – they don’t have to try to be flowers or perform flower-ness.”

In addition to flowers, [SUBJECT] has saved tattoos of elephants with trunks held high. [SUBJECT] explained that her maternal grandmother, who lived next door until she died of dementia and pneumonia when [SUBJECT] was twenty-five, collected elephants with trunks up in the air. “They’re supposed to be good luck,” [SUBJECT] said.

In an ideal world, [SUBJECT] says, if money, pain, and time weren’t issues, she would get a tattoo of a whole swath of cherry blossoms, spreading from one hip across her back to the opposite shoulder blade and ribs. [SUBJECT] has the details planned out. Shades of pink with accents of cerulean and bright green on soft brown branches. The style would be soft, somewhere between a traditionally outlined tattoo and the watercolor style. When asked about the likelihood of getting such a tattoo, [SUBJECT] simply shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe someday.”

CONCLUSION

Despite arguments from those, including [SUBJECT,] who view adornment as both a method of expression and reclamation, [SUBJECT] feels that the threat of violence, something that has been documented, causes her to hesitate before adorning her body:

> I feel like – well, there isn't really a feeling, it's basically a fact – that there are ways in which my body has already been marked in very public ways. The fact that I'm a woman with this disease that changed both my outward appearance and how my body functions is one way. My body visibly takes up space, more space than it "should" take up. And how society has developed ways to make you feel like something is wrong with you because you couldn't control yourself, even if there wasn't anything that you could control, is aggressive and ugly and causes me to think a lot about what control I have over the ways my body is marked. In some ways, the less visible I feel my body is, the safer I can be because I'm not drawing attention to myself. I won't be asked questions. I won't have to interpret what that stare is supposed to mean. I won't have to analyze a doctor's tone of voice or facial expression. I can just go about my life in the body I have.

Of particular interest to this researcher is how [SUBJECT] makes the connection between adornment and memory. [SUBJECT] said:

> Yeah, I think that's why I keep pushing the idea of getting a tattoo into the future. There are definitely things I want to commemorate, like the elephant tattoo for my grandma, but I also think…there's that frustration/anger/ambivalence piece to it, too. That I've gotten so good at not only suppressing things that have happened to me that I can't name those emotions anymore so I don't know what I would attempt to reclaim?

When asked if piercings differ from tattoos, [SUBJECT] talks about permanence: "With a piercing, I always have the opportunity to change my mind," [SUBJECT] said. "If I don't like it or feel that it isn't 'me' anymore, I can take the jewelry out and let it grow closed. I've never done that on purpose, but the allure of having that option is there. Of course, there may be a scar and scar tissue under the skin, but it's a lot easier to get rid of a piercing than it is a tattoo." [SUBJECT] had to think when asked if these attitudes are related to memory and the changes her body has gone through. "Maybe they are related," [SUBJECT] said. "Maybe it's because if I change the ways I think about what I've gone through and how I name those feelings, then the option to change the ways I've adorned myself are still there. But a tattoo – that's there forever. I'm not sure if I'm ready for…I'm not sure if I'm at a point where I can do that yet."

A point of curiosity, and a bigger question that this case study aimed to examine, was how all of this relates to ideas of femininity and identity. "I think it causes me to sometimes overthink how my body appears in public – from what I'm wearing to what is marked on my skin – and how other people think they understand me as a person based on my appearance," said [SUBJECT]. "It's exhausting, but when I have a day where I feel like I don't really give a care, I feel extra visible. As in, I feel more visible because I don't care, and my lack of care is seen as an invitation for comment, which then makes me think about what that stare means or what that person is saying when they ask me a question. So, I have these options in front of me where I can be exhausted and somewhat safe or I can be somewhat carefree and feel overly visible."

"But really, I think the direction we're headed collectively is towards acceptance of adorned women, of women who have piercings and tattoos and scars. It's not because our ideas of what ‘normal’ femininity is have drastically changed, but because more women are willing to express themselves through what is on their skin.”

[SUBJECT] has ideas for future study on body adornment. “I read an article that talked about women and scars and popular culture, and the line that really stood out to me was, ‘It’s time for our culture to find beauty in the stories that mark us.’ That line hit a nerve and makes a lot of sense, even if we can’t quite put those stories into words.” In response to the question of whether [SUBJECT] will ever find the words to put her stories together in a way that adorns her, [SUBJECT]’s response was rather straightforward.

“Someday.”

To Gaze

A salesman stands at the door where I work, saying that he is in the neighborhood and asks if I have a moment to talk about ordering office supplies. He is good at what he does. He has an answer or response for every statement I make about being satisfied with our current system, which is going to the store and buying supplies as we need them. When he responds that his company could do that for us, he looks me dead in the eyes. After the second or third time, I wrap myself in my sweater and fold my arms across my chest.

Being seen unnerves me. I'm not used to the glances or long stares. I am more comfortable as the behind-the-scenes person who takes charge not by being in front but by making sure everything else also remains unseen by working properly. Being seen, being the object of someone else's gaze, puts me on high alert. Knowing that my body takes up space, knowing that my body has a disease that causes it to function differently, knowing that my body has experienced violence from those who are not supposed to betray me sets off warning signs that trouble may be brewing. It is at this climax, this turning point where potential energy morphs into something else, potential shifting into actualization, that I must make the decision to be seen, be the object of one's gaze, or be safe and unseen.

I think of an art exhibit I saw a few years ago in Cincinnati about a piece inspired by Laura Mulvey's essay that named a particular way of seeing. "Medusa," created by South African artist Frances Goodman, discussed how the gaze works, a way of reducing women to the level of a passive object to create security in the sense that men are still in control. The sculpture pondered the things that women do to make their bodies more pleasing and reassuring. The results of the artist's work were monstrous. Goodman assembled thousands of used acrylic fingernails in the shape of tentacles reaching out of the museum wall. Each nail was a different color and had a different pattern. Some were rounded and smooth, some squared off, some long and pointed as if to invite a second look but only from a safe distance. Together, the nails curled and twisted, stretched and recoiled, reached out to be touched as lovers do, while yet coiled into themselves as one might do when in the depths of an uncontrolled spiral.

I got my nails done regularly when I was younger. The acrylic ones, like those molded into tentacles. It started with junior prom, and I kept getting them filled and painted and buffed down, a new look meant to invite a glimpse every two weeks. The cost was significant for a high school student working fast food for six dollars an hour; one manicure was $25. The smell of chemicals made me lightheaded. I was often sweaty from practice or smelled of hamburgers after work when I walked in for my appointment. After I had the nails put on, I needed to learn how to do almost everything with my hands all over again.

But each compliment made me feel more seen, more favorable as something to be looked at. "Your nails are so cute!" they would say. When I walked into the salon missing one, two, sometimes three nails, I apologized to the woman who did my nails. "I'm sorry. I'm just not good at these girl things. I'm trying."

After a while, the struggle to keep up with the nails in addition to everything else I was supposed to do felt ridiculous. When the nails finally came off shortly after my high school graduation, the damage was done. If someone warned me about what this process would do to my natural nails, I can't remember. My natural nails were brittle and ready to break when bent just the wrong way. The chemicals in the acrylic ate away at them, just as being seen – or not seen – ate away at me.

The damage of the gaze runs deep. It chips away at most of the layers of how I compose my sense of self, especially in the months after I was told that my body, the only one I have and that I had been taught will and should behave and look and act in a particular way, the one that never could and never would live up to impossible expectations because it just can't, the one that didn't necessarily fit the patriarchy's expectations of what is normal and natural, that my body was not only different but in a way that was dangerous if I didn't work to try to control this disease.

It is here that I can count the ways I've already damaged my body so that myself and others would see my body as being normal and natural. This was before a doctor sat me down in an examining room and explained what was happening under my skin. The casualties -- the parts of my body I tried to tame or fix or, worse yet, used to take out my frustration -- add up as does the body count in war. My nails, the restrictive diets that left me in near constant states of faintness that never really worked, the scars from the razor blades, the need to apologize, even the way my body tenses when anyone outside a small circle of people touches me. To please others, my sense of self sometimes feels eroded and worn down, corners bent and some pieces not quite fitting together the way they used to, some pieces shoved so far down into subconsciousness that I've found ways to put what pieces remain back together so that it appears nothing is missing. If I am to survive, I must protect what is left before I disintegrate into shards, reaching out to be reassembled as a warning.

Like the art piece in the museum.

Like the nails I no longer have done, let alone paint myself.

Like the choices I make about make up, hair, clothes – they're all ways that I make myself seen just enough that I exist as a human, but not as an object.

Like the sweater I wrap around myself as I talk to the salesman at my door.

I know this is a defense mechanism. I know that this salesman is simply doing his job, but when being seen, being on the receiving end of a gaze, being someone who has felt the force of not being a natural and normal object that makes certain men feel unsafe and insecure in their masculinity and patriarchal status, being so tired of making those split second decisions to determine what kind of gaze is safe and what means having violence directed at me, being a microcosm of all these things becomes too much, making myself less seen is a sigh of relief.

I wrap myself in my sweater and fold my arms across my chest, straightening myself to return to the good posture that had been reinforced in me time and time again. "I'm sorry, sir, but we're happy with what we already have here," I said.

Sifting the Feminine Bones

Freytag's Pyramid is an ultimate form of deception.

There is more than one shape writers use to tell stories. The idea that this is the shape of a story, this oddly shaped triangle, leaves out so many other shapes, so many other stories. It forces a limited view on what a story can do. What a story can be. That limiting force pushes stories into a corner where the number of possibilities shrink. The number of ways we think about ourselves shrinks, too.

Stories do not all have the same shape, just as not all bodies have the same shape. The idea of a universal shape of stories or bodies does not work for everyone. Nor should it work for everyone.

Chapter 1: Exposition, aka The Introduction

I sometimes marvel at how smooth the introduction, the exposition, is shown to be in drawings of the shapes of stories. I guess it's a collective sense of idealism that causes us to want that introduction to be smooth, to have something that isn't necessarily perfect, but is as close to perfect as we can possibly get.

When I think of the story of my body, the exposition part of the story is not flat and smooth. If anything, I think of this part of the story shaped like two separate threads, intertwining with one another like a ribbon or the double helix of a person's DNA.

Stories are a part of who I am. Instead of putting headphones on her belly and playing classical music for me before I was born, my mom read me stories. I was always surrounded by stories, whether those found in books or ones told to me by other family members. As a child, I ran around the open spaces of my rural backyard and my mother's family farm as if boundaries did not exist, as if I lived in the stories told to me and I was simply a whirlwind, a wisp of a spirit on its next adventure. When you're small and the space around you seems so vast, so unending, the possibility for new stories is infinite, even if I didn't recognize where one story ended and another began. To me, it was all one big adventure.

Not only have stories always been a part of who I am, but so has my body. I've watched the family videos and looked at the photo albums, and in them, I appear to be an average child. Not too short, not too tall. Not too thin, but not chubby either. I wonder if there was an inkling that something could go wrong and, if so, when would the catalyst be activated. If I think of the shape of this moment, the exposition, the introduction, as two strands twisted together, if the points of contact or intersection between storytelling and my body are moments where something happened. Maybe not *the* catalyst, but small reactions along the way that intertwined my body and storytelling, to the point where the two have merged into almost, but not quite one and the same.

My dad has told me on more than one occasion that I was a cute little kid until someone taught me how to read. "Then you sat down and got fat," he says. Maybe I should have filed this moment away differently in my mind, the moment where I first remember someone else tying stories and my body together in a way that feels alienating, feels damning, feels like a layer of guilt cast over enjoyment.

Maybe those points of contact between storytelling and my body were, in retrospect, moments of foreshadowing. Just as a writer creates moments of foreshadowing on a page, maybe there was something foreshadowing what was about to happen, creating tension but also warning me that girlhood is something different than womanhood. In girlhood, there were still warnings – the criticisms of my body starting at such a young age – that set off alarms I was unable to hear.

Warning, something should have told me – you're approaching a moment at which, whether you like it or not, you can't go back.

Chapter 2: The Inciting Incident

Is there only one inciting incident in a story?

After writing the introduction, I think of revisions. I wonder if I have a place in the introduction of my story and how it changes what the inciting incident is. I can think of several inciting incidents, but each one asks to follow a different introduction. The onset of puberty is one of them and the way my body struggled to work as the way it was supposed to at this point in my life; I "bloomed early" as my mom told me, just as she had when she was a child. There is also the inciting incident when my dad and I had a physical confrontation about my hair. That moment when my dad pinned me against the wall because I yelled at my mother for hurting me while she brushed my hair. Other turning points come to mind, like the moment I realized that my body wasn't acting in the same ways as my friends at our age, the look on my pediatrician's face when she read over my charts, or any number of ways I noticed I was different.

Instead of a single point where the trajectory changes, this scenario looks like multiple threads that occasionally come together, only to result in an explosion that changes the course of the story. The pyramid is no longer straightforward in its neat and clean lines, but instead looks like a mess before the story starts. The pyramid was never as neat and clean as it appeared to be.

I wonder if another inciting incident in the story of my body is the moment of my birth, that coming into this world as a living, breathing being was the moment that changed the trajectory of a story I didn't know I was a part of. Maybe by virtue of being born, I've changed the narrative, but making that statement makes me feel uncomfortable. But it gives my story a fixed point in history – a date, a time, a place, and even the peculiarity of an ice storm and the coldest day of the winter that year. Here, the introduction would be something that looked more like a lineage. Whether it's a family lineage or a lineage of women of which I am a tiny part, there are threads of stories that all somehow lead to one inciting incident early in the morning on a cold winter's day.

In another draft, I lose track of just what the inciting incident could be. The story of my body is just another thin thread in a greater story of what it means to be a woman. I wonder if the inciting incident was an agreement between genes that decided I was going to be born female, unlocking a particular world I was to be a part of and figure out. Maybe it is a combination of two threads, one where femininity is both threatened and threatening. That story is an example of what patriarchy does when a woman's body does not fit the narrative, does not behave in the way that it is supposed to so all the structures continue functioning. This is the point where the inciting incident has the potential to bring the whole structure of the story tumbling to the ground, creating something new out of the kicked up dust.

Chapter 3: Rising Action

The rising action is, in my opinion, one of the most difficult parts of a story to write. A writer must know a lot of details about their story before sitting down to write to make the rising action of a story do the work that it needs to do. A careful choreography happens here. A writer can't reveal too many details too early, nor withhold them for too long unless they want to risk losing the reader. A writer can keep throwing plot twists and turns at their characters. They can use breaks and space to create tension as the rising action continues to build, but at some point, a writer must reveal what is at stake for the person at the center of the story. Without this choreography, the rest of the story unravels.

In the story of my body, the rising action splits into multiple lanes, like the widening of a highway as it approaches the crest of a hill.

One lane is the story of my body developing. Along the way, there are several moments when a doctor, someone – anyone – should have noticed that something wasn't right. There were partial realizations, but no one put together all the pieces to realize that not everything that was medically "wrong" with my body was entirely my fault. No one seemed to put the cause and effect relationships together in the correct order until, in some ways, it was too late. I had already formed an understanding of my body, what it does, and what I hoped it would do in the future. The rising action here diffuses at its height, the moment when the story turns, the moment I knew my plans for life may not be as easily realized as I previously thought.

Another lane of rising action is the story of me discovering what my body can do. After all, at the same time I am learning about desire and femininity, I was told that my body is not acceptable and that I needed to change it. Teenage years. My twenties. My dad: "You know, you're going to need to work on losing some weight if you want to think about getting a date or a boyfriend any time soon. Guys won't want to date you with a gut like that."

Even though I hadn't put a name to my experiences, it was also in the rising action of my story that I learned that there is a link between desire and violence, that one can incite the other, that the two can become entangled in ways that feel damning and contradictory. At times, it did. I turned that violence on myself not knowing the full extent of what was happening under my skin. I don't know how this story would have changed if I had known the full extent of what I went through. Maybe it would have changed. Maybe it wouldn't have. Maybe there are parts of this story that wouldn't exist had someone had put the pieces together sooner.

I wonder if it's possible that, if someone had been a little less certain somewhere along this slope of rising action, then maybe the rest of my story would have been different.

A third lane in the rising action of the story of my body is learning that the world is not always a safe place for women, even though it is safer for me than it is for many women. The places and people that I thought were safe and always would be safe might be the places where the violence creeps in, seeps in at the edges I thought were sealed against the outside world. In this part of the rising action, there are a series of lessons strung together that, had I heard the warning bells as a child, would have made more sense. Maybe the price of femininity would have made more sense, that even though there is power to be had and held as a woman, there are also prices to pay as a particular kind of woman, one whose story takes a different shape.

Chapter 4: Climax

No matter what the path towards the climax is, this point in my body's story looks the same. This is the moment where all the threads coalesce into one moment that I can say with certainty changed the narrative. The moment of diagnosis.

There were reasons beyond medicine for my experiences. When one's femininity does not fall in line with what is expected, the potential for both being seen as a threat and to be on the receiving end of violence increases greatly. A woman's body not being able to act and do some of the things that society and culture has constructed as inherently female poses a risk. After all, what happens if a multitude of femininities were to exist? What happens if a woman, if a person, if I, were able to define femininity on my own terms and society and culture were okay with it?

What would happen if I were allowed to grieve a change in that understanding without the baggage of knowing change meant there were other ways in which violence could come at me?

What would happen if I could have just grieved a change in how I understood my body without having to think about what a life of consequences of this disease would look like?

Maybe the structure would come tumbling down.

Maybe I wouldn't have needed to grieve. It would have been the beginning of another chapter instead of the turning point of the whole story.

Chapter 5: Falling Action

The slope towards resolution involves a lot of learning and unlearning.

I’ve had to learn a lot about myself. I’ve had to evaluate not only the ways I think about my body, but the ways I’ve been told that my body was wrong or not right over the course of a lifetime. I still have decades of learning to rethink and reimagine. The work of editing and revising one’s story is difficult and draining, especially when the story is being revised on one end while being written on the other.

There are things about my body that I can control and things that I can’t. The accompanying lesson is learning to accept what I cannot control. I have two choices here: to accept what I can control and my body for what it is and what it can do, or to not accept it. I’ve spent too long not accepting myself because of the violence directed at me because of what my body wasn’t doing, what it should do but doesn’t. Acceptance requires a constant resetting of how I not only view myself, but my story as well.

On this slope towards resolution there are other lessons I must learn. Sometimes, accepting this new femininity means there are moments when I have to separate myself from those who have always been in my life.

Like the moment when my closest friend named my father’s behavior for what it is. “You know what your dad does is abuse, right?” she said. Naming his behavior in this way had crossed my mind once or twice before but was not a name I could commit to. To be honest, I am still not ready to commit to naming his behavior in that way because I don’t know if this is what I have survived. My friend’s comment makes me wonder. If I’ve excused, written off, explained away, tolerated, and – dare I say even accepted – my father’s behavior for so long, then what other behaviors – from my father and from others – have I treated in the same way? Why is the word *abuse* a name for this behavior that I cannot commit to?

Like the moment that my high school turned college turned post-college boyfriend, the one who kept asking *why* when I was at one of my darkest points, the one whose voice still asks *why* in my head on a rare occasion, the one I was with for almost half of my life and thought I was going to marry, the one who I cried in front of when I told him what this diagnosis meant, said to me weeks later, “I’m sorry, but I can’t be the person that you need me to be” and walked away.

Sometimes, the falling action, the slide into resolution, also includes twists and turns. The downward slope towards resolution isn’t always as sleek as it looks. There are bumps and there are more turning points. Sometimes, there are craters to climb out of.

Chapter 6: The Resolution, The Denouement, or “The Unraveling of the Knot”

I don’t know what the resolution to this story is.

I could argue that the resolution is some form of acceptance, that I have come to terms with the fact that I have this disease. Those changes also make me rethink what it means to be in a body that I and others have decided is a woman’s body. This resolution doesn’t fit, though, because I haven’t found a form of absolute acceptance. Acceptance, in this case, feels like resignation, that I know I have a condition where *x* is happening and could potentially cause a whole bunch of *y* associated health problems as I continue with my life. Acceptance feels like shrugging my shoulders and giving in. Resignation feels like giving up any hope that I might be able to do something about my body. Both acceptance and resignation feel much too passive for the person I am, as if they’re different forms of standing aside and letting whatever happens to my body happen.

I could also argue that having my disease “under control,” as doctors would say, is another resolution for this story. I have learned how to live with my PCOS, and therefore, my story and my body has returned to status-quo-sub-prime, a slightly varied yet forever different version of who I was. This doesn’t feel like a resolution either, because though my disease is under control, I don’t always feel like I am in control of my disease. The random onsets of pain, the unexplained shifts in weight, the changes in my diet because of a newly discovered food allergy that also amplifies the effects of my hormonal imbalance. The fact that my health will always be something that puts me at risk for things far more worrisome and scarier than what I experience now does not feel like control, regardless of what preposition someone decides to put in front of the key word here.

Control.

In or under?

This feels like another false resolution, a knot not quite unraveled. It is the same feeling I have when I think I’ve reached the end of a story and turn the page, expecting to see acknowledgements, the author’s bio, or a list of book club questions and, instead, find that the story continues. There are still pages and pages left to go.

I could argue that the resolution to the story of my body only arrives in death but that is terrifying. The anxiety wakes in my chest, muscles tighten, my breath quickens and comes in shallow gulps for air. This is something I have thought about, a delve into what the future looks like that makes my pulse race easier than almost anything. PCOS is both a metabolic and a reproductive disorder, but not one that is fatal. There are enough associated health conditions that can stem from the effects of PCOS that can end my life to cause a disconnect between my self and my body – fear of what could happen, when it could happen, and whether it will be this or that or something completely different that will be the cause of my stilled heart, relaxed lungs, silenced mind.

I try not to think too much, because to think about what could happen causes an existential terror that freezes me in place, allowing a dread to settle into my bones that takes days to shake off.

It could be a heart attack or heart disease.

It could be complications from diabetes, something I spent the first twenty-five years of my life watching my maternal grandmother fight until something else ended her life.

It could be a stroke.

It could be cancer.

It could be complications from a miscarriage, something I am five times more likely to experience.

It could be something else entirely.

The writer in me is both frustrated and terrified that so much of the resolution to the story of my body is unknown. This twisted shape of Freytag's Pyramid does not fit the narrative I am trying to convey, and none of the options available work the way I want them to. Unfortunately, the shape of a story doesn't always look the way that a writer, or even a reader, wants it to look and act and be. Sometimes, the story itself is just too powerful to be able to control.

The story of my body is not the only thread that is headed towards resolution. I am reminded that there are forces beyond me at play here, and those stories are continually working towards a resolution that those forces do not want. Those stories are a threat to the ones society and culture have told us, all of us, about how the world works, about how people are supposed to be and move through a world those forces helped create. I am reminded that, in some ways, I will always be fighting against someone else’s story of my body, one that says that one over there, that one writing a different story – well, she just couldn’t follow the directions. She didn’t write a story that looks like it should.

She was even given a picture.

Sometimes I wonder where the line is between not wanting to write that story and being destined to write a different story, if destiny is even something to consider.

There are times when that weight is too much. The grief comes back to the surface when I think about the moments when the criticisms hurled at me layer themselves on one another. The moments when I feel like the monster inside of me exists in a way that is too great. The moments when carrying the burden of telling a different story is too much to carry. I know I am not the only one and the weight of that story is not as great as others, but there are still days when my story is too much.

There are times in those moments when I catch myself in a mirror. It might be the one in the bathroom in my apartment. It might be the rearview mirror in my car, or another mirror entirely. The sight of my reflection causes me to stop. There are times when I stop and, dare I say it, admire my reflection. I see that the courage and strength I attribute to other women is also in me, too, and despite knowing what I do about my body and what the future may hold, the story of my body has also made me strong enough to continue carrying that weight and to do something with it.

There are times when my reflection catches me off guard. For a moment in time, I don’t breathe. My eyes start to sting. These are the times when the weight becomes too much and, if I am alone, I look away and cry.

I can only hold my breath for so long.

I feel myself, internally and externally, change shape. This time, I feel the tears pooling at the corners of my eyes, threatening to spill over again and again. I can only hold in so much.

I exhale.

I inhale.

The story continues.

VITA

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A Northeast Ohio native, Ashley holds MA degrees in literature, cultural/critical theory, and social practice from Kent State University and in creative writing from the University of Cincinnati, as well as a BA in creative writing and journalism from Ashland University. In her spare time, Ashley can be found attempting a recipe or craft project that she most likely found somewhere on the internet.