

Selected Body Stories, 1996-- 2021

1. Small and compact like a Manhattan neighborhood, creased with lines like when sidewalks and tree roots meet: these are my hands. They tell my stories. My hands have cradled babies, grown food, braided hair, swept pens across paper, packed belongings into boxes, embraced friends, plucked notes on guitars, knit yarn into hats, seasoned applesauce, killed chickens, made language, grazed across skin, sung melodies to plants, gripped rocks, made beds, curled into fists, held snow, held hope, tried and failed, pressed through waves, touched metal, touched plastic, touched skin. These hands have steadied others and myself. These hands are rough and calloused and weren't big enough to hold a softball in them for their first thirteen years, but have always been big enough to know the difference between right and wrong. Did you know that there are no muscles in the fingers, only tendons? I learned this only after I injured a finger while climbing. My pulley got pinched because I was climbing too hard, too fast. Tendons don't get strong as quickly as muscles do. They take time to build and my hands asked me to know this. These stories take time to strengthen.

2. I remember girls in my elementary school whispering; I remember how the school nurse wouldn't tell us much in 6th grade health class other to say that we should all start using deodorant. At the end, she casually mentioned that we shouldn't worry about bleeding and bleeding and misplacing everything inside of us. Apparently someone was already equating being female with losing. I didn't start my period until much later, so I had years to gather information and then dispense it like candy. I secretly coveted the periods of my peers-- I wanted to understand what the facts felt like as they moved

through my body. When it finally happened, I was 15 or 16 and I wanted to shriek for my mom, but I didn't because my brother's childhood best friend was over and I didn't want him knowing. I must've learned that fact along the way, too-- blood is secret when it drops from the womb. I think, though, that somewhere along the way someone must've misunderstood the original phrase, stumbled 'sacred' into 'secret'.

3. My mom tells the story of how she broke an arrow in the soft notch at the base of her throat in order to learn how to conquer fear; every time I think of doing something similar, I feel like I'm choking. Maybe the problem is that my body is not equipped to withstand such force; maybe the problem is that I have too much fear for a broken arrow to ever relieve. I think my throat would break long before the arrow would, anyways. My throat, made brittle from years of straining to keep the body and mind separate, would splinter first and then what? The final retaining wall between my mind and body would be gone and I would be submerged into the wetness of emotion.

4. Instructions for how to find your real laugh: lay on your back with your arms crossed over your chest and as you say "ha", have another person press down hard on your crossed arms. Most people, as the air is forcibly expelled from their lungs, can't help but burst into deep belly laughter. When I do it, my laugh sounds like a witch's cackle-- hearty and warm and generous and clever. Sometimes I try to prolong the moment in order to keep witnessing a thing that normally I do not have access to. My regular laughter sounds hollow and flat in comparison.

5. My chest is a logged mountain. Once solid slopes have caved in and turned soggy. I don't breathe as deeply as I could-- there is a very small wailing person prostrated within and I don't want to disturb them. I can never tell if this is kindness or neglect.

6. I didn't get breasts until well after everyone else. It was like waiting for the bus-- you wait and wait until you can't bear to wait for one more second and so you give up and start walking and of course that's when the bus arrives. Getting breasts was like that for me: I'd finally given up all hope and then one day in 11th grade they arrived and turned my body convex. People started staring and all of a sudden I became public property in an entirely new way.

7. How is it that the long thick hair on my head is consistently praised, but that same long thick on my legs and under my arms and between my legs is shamed and derided? Razors mow down hair, leaving ridges of angry red mountains in their wake. Wax suffocates hair and then forcefully removes it from its home, roots and all. I wage war on my body and the body cries out. I don't listen and the body cries out. I talk loud and the body cries out. I move away and the body falls flat. This is the sound of silence.

8. I believe in bodies that are greater than the sum of their parts.

9. There is a parenthesis of pain lodged in the lower right quadrant of my abdomen that I can only write around. The crescent curves inwards like a sickle and it is darkdarkdark like a bruise. My body knows how to come apart: disassemble quickquickquick before they can catch you, put all the pieces worth saving in a cabin in the woods, refashion

yourself into a facade of a whole person and then brace yourself for the onslaught. I know how to do this; I can execute with my eyes closed. There is a belated sense of pride in having survived; sometimes I wonder if that will be my biggest achievement. The parenthesis of pain doesn't let me forget the lengths I have gone to in order to be here. The parenthesis of pain doesn't let me look, either.

10. I don't know where to go from here except to pay attention and I don't know how to pay attention without feeling and I don't know how to feel without forgiving and I don't know how to forgive without being angry and I don't know how to be angry without taking up space and I don't know how to take up space and still be safe in my body.

11. What my back would like to say: *Go forward, but please don't leave the slow and rusty parts of yourself behind in your quest for healing. Make a list of who travels with you and ask them what they need, where they want to go. Make sure that they know that they are cared for, too.*

12. Last fall the leaves fell down and I spread them out around me because for the first time in my life I wanted to see. For the first time in my life, it was safe to see. It's winter now. The leaves that were once whole are decomposing and returning to the matter of the earth. Most days I worry that it's taking too long and that spring will never come. Only on odd days do I remember that I am a pour over coffee body-- filtration is slow and steady. These stories take time to strengthen. The leaves haven't yet turned into a rich peat, but I am trying to trust that they are well on their way. I am decomposing; I am integrating. I've been forgetting the *soft animal of my body*¹ my whole life, but

¹ Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese"

yesterday I heard the murmur of its hurtings for the first time. *Take us with you*, my body begged. So, with breath catching, I closed my eyes and listened today.

13. The body says thank you, tucks a face brimming with shy smiles under the wing of an arm, and quietly hums with pleasure.