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Where Fish Sleep in Sand and Satin Pillowcases

Cotton thread, video

My body has always felt separate from me. Lots of the time, it's inarticulate, hands twisted up with ruby-red nails and bees all over my ears. I know it's there, but my body feels often like a clay girl instead, perilously twined together and carried around on a wooden board.

In my research for this project, I discovered quickly how powerfully the body's biological systems impact our perception, behavior, and psychology. Our bodies' memories and responses affect every aspect of our outlook, and often force us to recognize the parts of ourselves we try to ignore. However, when our bodies' instincts contradict our ideals, they confuse our sense of self. The body is so central to how we view ourselves that we don't understand it as a malleable and ever-changing entity.

I wanted to explore this malleability in my art and envision ways of uniting abstract and non-physical ideas of self with the physical. Weaving threads together, I created wings (fish fins?) out of lots of knitted thread. I wanted to make a form that is animalistic and instinctual to counter cultural ideas of form and body. Taking slices of poetry I've written, I created a code to turn letters into numbers and charted sentences onto a 5x5 grid. I used these grids as a reference for my knitting pattern, weaving them in throughout the piece and mirroring them to create symmetrical designs. I filmed the process. In my first plan, I thought I'd knit the design in one day and film it from start to finish. Obviously, it took much longer than one day, so I filmed brief excerpts throughout the week and cut them together. Like much of "creating" myself, the process was long and full of frustrating surprises.

HANDSTANDS, MARY JANES, AND WHAT
IT MEANS TO HAVE A BODY



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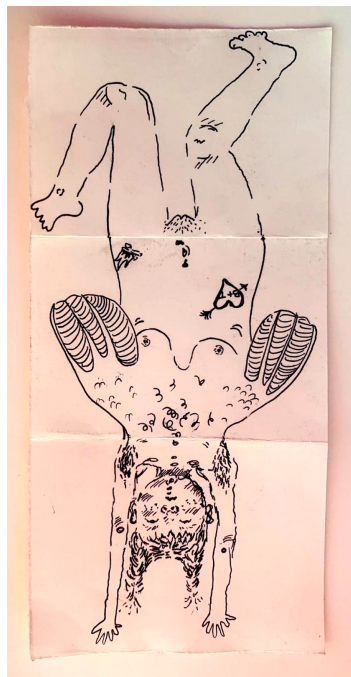
Writer's Note: By interrogating my own personal experience of my body, this essay explores self, imitation, exacerbation, and bodily experience.

Somewhere in the belly of a tree is a body. It's next to the river, where the sun pushes down in a thick, hot band onto the canopy; and leaks through the holes in the trees in slow, hungry tendrils. The river is still. Real and immovable and inconsequential. The body is less so. She works her way in between cracks and turns two dimensional. Too sticky on her skin. There's dust on the couch, dust in the door. She tries to clean, sometimes, but the river pushes closer, leaving behind webbings of muddy, yellow lace in its place. In the ground, caterpillars with little red crowns weave in and out of hole-houses. She plays violin into the river, and leaves notes for the caterpillars they don't accept. Do you remember La Folia? It's in Suzuki Vol. 6, the one where it starts out slow and high and moves back and forth between urgency and fragility. The trees are like that, silver on the tips and delicate. They'd fall down if she lit a stove, she thinks, so she has spaghetti for dinner, every single night.

Her hands have little birds on each fingertip, with no eyes but big wings like towers. Right at the halfway point, there's towers too, smoke stacks that one day will be used to escape the zombie apocalypse. Sometimes, she thinks there's a bee hive above her, but she doesn't check. All she can see is the buzz up and all around, and it fills her veins and stomach, and sometimes the noise gets really loud. And she has a face, she knows, but talks to it with the same impassable unfamiliarity as the river. And she plays dress up until her body blends out and is wrapped with rubber bands, and it all gets really fucking confusing.

I. WHEN I WAS A CENTAUR

I don't feel particularly connected to my body. I used to do lots of handstands for circus, first against a wall, then with someone spotting me, then on my own. I never figured them out.



*Me and Carrissa Chung,
exquisite corps*

My arms and my shoulders and my core made sense, stacked up like Jenga bricks, one on top of the other; but my legs flailed out to the side, flexed feet and wobbly knees. Like the bottom of a botched exquisite corps. I'd practice in the contortion room, at 6 o'clock when the light streamed in and reflected back against the 1970's-hospital-green walls, filling up like a swimming pool with golden green rivers. "Press up with your feet like they'll go through the ceiling!" My teacher Serchmaa would say. "Connect with your core" and all the old adages. I was terrified to tell her when I decided to quit contortion.

In school, my body felt like a skin suit, stickiness on my fingers and carrying myself on a wooden board like a clay girl, collapsable and perilously twined together. Or at night, when we'd run around the beach and jump into the water, getting freaked out by the fishes, the sand making slip-and-slides under our toes. Until the water covers me, my body here is real and inconsequential. When I start to swim, she moves back towards a foreign object.

In the West, the body is considered increasingly separate from the soul, severing flesh from spirit. Perhaps, then, my handstands are no surprise, although my dad says weak cores are just a family trait. I've looked into the West's mind-body dichotomy regardless. While our cultural delineation now blankets all aspects of culture and socialization in the West, it began with medicine.

What we now call Western biomedicine was developed as European countries were colonizing the world (Leguizamon 3306). On the bodies of those colonized, “the adoption of biomedicine was never a free choice but an imposition,” (Leguizamon 3307) designed to increase their profit revenue. Simultaneously, the industrial revolution and the expansion of capitalism blossomed throughout the world. The rise of biomedicine was opportune, then, because it “socialized the body as a function of both the labor force and the reproductive force” (Leguizamon 3307). Solidified by philosophers and writers, most notably Descartes, the intellectualizing of the mind and the mechanization of the body have pressed vines deeper and deeper into our histories. Since the eighteenth century, “disciplinary practices...aimed at separating the body from emotions and at punishing the body” (especially the female body), have worked their ways into systems, schools, and beliefs (Pandolfi, 17). Our medicines, rules, and disciplines conceive of the body as an object to be “monitored, manipulated, and rendered passive,” (Pandolfi, 17). At the same time, the body’s complex somatic systems press forward their instincts, memories, and emotions, revealing implicitly an “autonomous discourse of resistance,” (Pandolfi, 17). Sometimes, on rare days, Serchmaa would train us with the professional girls, all my age and all wrapped up in ballet buns like little birds. We called them “Serchmaa’s girls,” and the way they held their bodies upside down was delicate, bird legs sticking up with branches in the air. My stomach wriggled up full of little bugs and screamed.

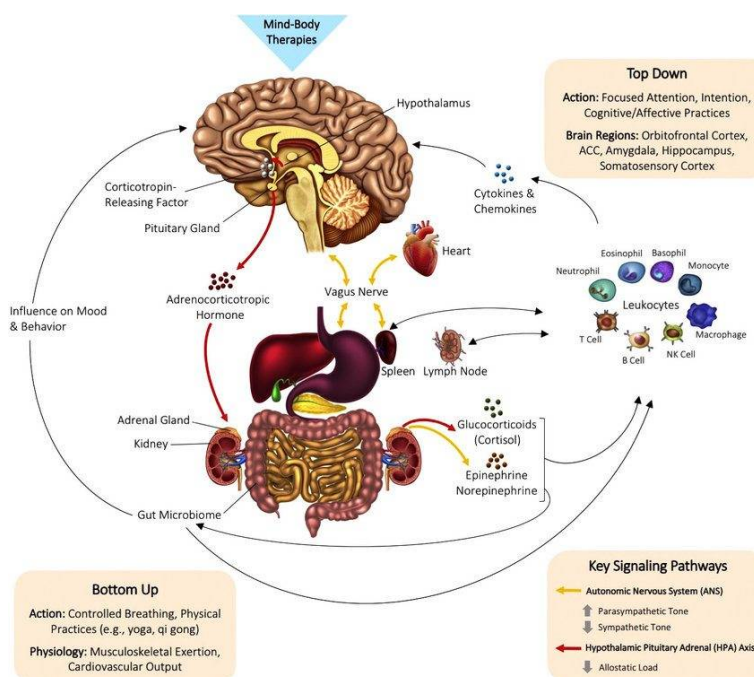
II. THUMB TACKS AND SPAGHETTI GIRL

A French doctor, Édouard Claparède, once had a patient with amnesia who could not form new memories. She had no recollection of the sterile, white-walled room she met him again in every day. One day, he pricked her with a tack as he shook her hand. It must have hurt. And the next afternoon, when she greeted him with a blank gaze and polite smile, she jerked her hand away

on instinct. Unbeknownst to her brain, her body “held her hostage,” keeping her physically incapable of touching a hand she had no conscious reason to fear (McDonald, 89). These memories are body memories, implicit instead of explicit, that shut the hippocampus down and encode a set of somatic responses after an emotionally charged or frequently repeated experience. They control vast expanses of our behavior, the way we react to the world, the way we view everyday objects, the way we view people. There’s other ways the body controls our behavior, too. The gut microbiome, influenced by both diet and environment, has direct correlation with depression and subsequent decision making (Korbi and Sigurjonsson, 12).

Our bodies affect our attention, *Ramirez-Duran, Daniella. “Exploring the Mind-Body Connection Through Research”. 9/2020.*

our intuition, our ability to pick up on details (Csordas, 138). In Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine, the body's communicative abilities make it “not merely a mechanism entirely controlled by biology, but a site where signs of harmony or disharmony can be



read.... all suffering is contextualized in a wider field of forces more complex than the purely biomedical etiology,” (Leguizamón, 3310). It’s no wonder, then, that mental health in countries that employ Ayurvedic medicine is endlessly more recognized and cared for (Halliburton, 61).

When I was little, I caught my finger in my stroller and ended up in the hospital without a nail and half my fingertip. I don’t remember it; I’ve only heard stories of the alcohol wipes and

the hospital room and fluorescent lights. But now, when I smell rubbing alcohol, my body shudders into rapid rejection. It's obvious, once you pay attention, how imperative and illuminating the reactions of the body are. Before the mind even registers threat, every hair and thread and finger tenses; speech grows inarticulate; eyes swim; ears fill with bees; knees and elbows grow wobbly like shaky bridges (Lucretius, 70-71). Culturally, we regard the mind for the most part as the force that controls the body. On the contrary, however, the biological body is far from a passively constructed mechanism— it reacts back.

III. VALENCIA

Imagine you are walking to the store, past the laundromat and the three legged dog, and you pause to see your reflection in the window of the laundromat. Imagine how the frost has collected on the window, muddy rivers in the drains filled with little fish. You twist your hair between your thumb and forefinger, adjust your bangs. You straighten your back. You're a little disconcerted, because the self in the mirror was slouched and you thought you'd made sure she wouldn't be, wrapped her up before you left the house in a baby-blue felt eye pillow.¹ As you walk, your braids stretch out longer. Your teeth grow seven legs, with orange toenail polish. In your stomach, a girl named Sally, with sharp nails and long eyelashes, screams and eats spaghetti. The street sign for Valencia has red graffiti underneath, and the sidewalk smells like car exhaust and the bakery across the way. She grabs your intestines in ruby-red claws and twists them into pink figure-eights.

IV. EXACERBATION AND THE IMITATIONS OF LEARNING TO BE A PERSON

When we're little, we have no concept of the self or the body's wants, at least beyond basic and essential needs (Dovey, 14). Nerves, trauma responses, and body memories come later, after

¹ Alter ego: eye mask

we learn to differentiate ourselves from the world around us. Instead, our bodies mimic, gripping tight with umbilical cords onto role models we identify with in gender, expression, or relation. We watch their movements, how their weight shifts, how they hold their voice. We imitate it. Our bodies learn how they move. When we don't, shame snakes into our gut, lodging insidious implicit memories. We get older, and these habits become natural. They both are and are not easy; they create a sense of safety, but the restrictiveness they require "leads to a more general unease". (Harbin, 265) We understand that the way we move our body dictates who we are, that we are what our bodies revert to. It feels good, sort of, to know that you can be what people want.

I've realized how natural it is for me to imitate someone else. I spend too much time on Pinterest, and wrap myself up in the same red ribbons I see people wear at school. I speak like my sibling Ruby, even when I don't want to. In a handstand, my teacher says, I turn my head too much to look at the person next to me. I wonder how much else my body holds? Edwardes says "the woman's body seems incapable of escaping the paradox of...continuously absorbing violence," (Edwardes, 167).

Zeiler, A Swedish researcher and anthropologist, introduced the phenomena of what she terms "exacerbation". Because the body's true needs and desires work their way to the surface when they are not fed, you will inevitably realize at some point that your lived bodily experiences do not align with your true needs and self. A false habit "that has been a part of one's lived body," regardless of its significance as an actual bodily default, unravels threads of our experience when understood as false (Zeiler, 74). When exacerbation progresses, Zeiler says, it becomes bodily alienation, the experience of being "doubled" (Zeiler, 80). Instead of "coinciding exactly with [your]self" in your experience, "[you] begin to exist *outside*," (Zeiler, 80). In other words, Zeiler is describing a double consciousness of sorts, developing "conflicted perceptions of our bodies, as

things to be both employed/acted through (subjects) and protected/acted on (objects)” (Harbin, 265).

This is a theory, but one that runs tributaries in and out of various studies, and through my own experience. I feel Zeiler’s bodily alienation when I talk to someone new and my teeth glitter, when I think about my gender and my stomach reaches up inside of me, full of water, and meets glass at the point where my skin touches the air.

V. YOU DARWINIAN GENE MACHINE! (HOW TO ESCAPE THE BODY AND ITS FAULTS)



Stefan Lochner, Last Judgement, circa 1435. Wikimedia Commons

Do you know how to leave all that behind? I wonder what it would be like to be bodiless. With no ants on your skin and no elbows or knees. Floating and suspended in a mess of all that is all around.

There aren’t, in pop culture, many examples to follow. The only true instance of non-physical non-materiality is in religious texts, when the soul leaves the body succeeding death. According to the Church of Jesus Christ, the Christian spirit leaves for the spirit world while the

body remains in the ground. But wouldn't that mean we are never really our bodies, if the entirety of ourselves can just run away from us so easily? I've found many theories. Most are silly, or full of philosophy that runs on nonsensical. Some of the best ones:

- a. That "there is no existent self without the physical self" (Edwardes, 167). The physical self is the Actual self, outside of social or cultural selves. It is a Darwinian gene-machine: governed by the imperatives to survive and thrive. The physical self has "no interest in philosophical positions such as self-sacrifice or generosity, unless they directly lead to enhanced personal survival or enhanced reproductive success" (Edwardes, 168).
- b. The body is not merely a mechanism controlled by biology but an entity imperative in understanding and getting to know the self (Besley, 47).
- c. There is no body at all. The self comprises every object and experience one encounters. There is no differentiation between internal and external (Deutsch, 34-45).

When I was younger, my dad used to tell me how all our cells are always moving, in and out of us, the same cells that made up the cat, and the ice cream cone, and the lamp post across the way. I'd picture cells like ants, crawling around my skin in a buzz and out of me, and cells of the sidewalk traversing up my ankle. I think the body *must* dictate the self, though, if not entirely distinct from the world, at least important. I don't know if it's true we're made up of ants, but I do know somatic systems cannot be separated from us. What else determines who we are, if not our habits and moods and relationships?

VI. FISH



Sendak, Maurice. *Where the Wild Things Are*. Red Fox, 2000.

In actuality, most literary references to escaping the body are more like *Where the Wild Things Are*, a transformation instead of a departure. To shift your body, instead of ignoring it, and mold it like clay into any shape you want, is enticing. I'd want to be a fish, or oceanic gray-green blob, or cubelike. Or like Max, with terrible eyes and terrible teeth.

Lane says that culturally the body is "pictured only as constraint rather than potentiality," (Lane, 140). This is true, and we are wrong. If the self has an urge to turn the body into another form, doesn't that in itself mean the body has agency, thoughts, imaginations? I think the body has potentiality and desire to grow and shift, internally and externally.

I feel myself shift when I dance, with arms up like lace and in and out of sunlight. I feel it at circus, most especially when I'm tired, up in the air and round in circles. Lane has a name for this; she calls it disorientation. When "the capacities for body control are made questionable," the world is thrown up, or the body thrown off the ground, the constant threads of the world disappearing for a moment. The body, in losing its support, might be "lost, undone, thrown" (Harbin, 263). This is important; it cultivates reflection on our bodily habits and selves. It allows us to see our autonomy, to see troubling habits as changeable and be curious about what we could be missing. Discomfort is vital. Possibility for disorientation is everywhere: on the sidewalk, in

my college counselor's office, in the sun through the Oxbow studio windows. Unlike conscious self-reflection, disorientations are bodily. I think this makes them much more important. Like water on the beach, waves up from under me and slip-and-slides in the sand.

If I was a fish, I'd live in a house made of knitting and shaped like mary janes. I'd hide in the tips of the toes and crochet lace all around me into a cocoon. Every morning, an old man with big boots would ride by and drop off the paper. The sun would shine through the lace and make patterns on me, and the threads would overlap, one above the other and under and over, sometimes a different thread, sometimes the same. I'd dig for treasures in the floor, and I'd find them, a mouse with red hair and a turquoise tiara. My body would be real and inconsequential. We would chat and laugh and she'd whisper secrets in my ear. We'd swim and swim and swim.

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