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I Like My Body More When it is Bruised

you keep hoping for something like a body but bearable

—Donna de la Perriere, *True Crime*

I was nine years old the first time I attended Weight Watchers and I think about that every time someone holds my naked body. Arms encircle my waist like keeping close a precious thing, fingertips press into the subcutaneous fat of my stomach. A nose caresses my jugular, tongue and teeth whisper, *You're so pretty, God*. I feel loved. I feel like I'm going to vomit. I close my eyes and hear the scratch of my pediatrician's blue ballpoint pen dragging across the height-weight chart, marking an X, highlighting that my weight had moved from a Concern to a Problem.

I stared at the rainforest animal wall cutouts while she explained to my mother that the list of good snacks and bad snacks magnetted to our fridge wasn't working. My weight continued to balloon. I needed a stricter diet. I needed control. I needed attendance records and weekly meetings and points, things to count. At nine, I could recite my times tables through twelve times twelve, so I could handle simple counting.

While on vacation at Anastasia Island the year before, a horse bucked me from his back when the girth loosened, causing the saddle to slip off the side. I landed underneath his wide belly, tangled in stirrups and legs, and the horse reared back then stepped on my face. A bruise-and-slice hoofprint started at the apple of my cheek, cut through my eyebrow, arched into my polystyrene bicycle helmet, then continued down the other side of my eyebrow. Blood enveloped the white of my eye. My face was swollen for weeks, blackened like a ripening muscadine. In the emergency room, someone said that if I hadn't worn a helmet, I would have died. Someone said that if the horse had weighed twelve more pounds, the pressure would have cracked my skull.

Or, that's how I remember it. They probably said, *if the horse had exerted twelve more pounds of pressure*, but I didn't understand pressure. I just understood weight and how much my face hurt.

My pediatrician kept the bicycle helmet to demonstrate road safety to her other patients. I stared at it, purple and cracked and mangled, on the shelf behind the nurse's station while she signed the consent form for me to join Weight Watchers. I pictured the horse's hoof punching all the way through the polystyrene, how I could probably squeeze hard enough to break the helmet in half.

Twelve pounds was ten percent of my nine-year-old body weight. A ten-percent loss is the first goal in Weight Watchers, the first silver star in the booklet cataloguing the weight loss journey. Twelve pounds is not so many pounds at all, and it could change everything.



Bruises are *hematomas*, a deposit of blood that's in the tissue, not in vessels where it belongs. The word is built from the Greek roots "heme-" and "-soma" and roughly translates to "body of blood." Specifically, bruises are a type of hematoma known as a contusion, which implies the damage and hemorrhaging in the capillaries have been caused by trauma.

Apples, shiners, hickies, blemishes. Trauma gets all the cute nicknames. My Nana called them black-and-blue spots. *How'd you get that black-and-blue spot?* she'd ask, gesturing a thin-skinned finger at my mottled preteen thighs. She'd poke them, connect them like dots running down to my skinned knees, my broken toenails.

No idea, I'd say truthfully.

She'd cluck her tongue and sigh, *Oh, baby-dawhl*.

I had a bad habit of running into furniture without looking. I constantly bumped my shoulders into door frames, checked my hip on the dining room table, stubbed my toes on the legs of chairs, coffee tables, end tables, bed wheels, the upright piano in the living room. My dad would joke, *forgot to tell you that we moved the wall last night*, whenever I rounded the corner too sharply and banged down the hallway. Without fail, I'd stumble into it again, as if somehow not-looking that time would turn out differently.

I have never known the breadth and scope of my body. I have never wanted to know my body—or I have always been afraid of what knowing would mean. Perhaps I am better off not knowing.

I have always been in flux. I've gained fifty pounds in a year and lost thirty in two months. I've gained forty in two months and lost fifty in a year. I can't keep track of what goes where, what fits where. What number on the tag is the right one. What cup size and band size is the perfect combination. What the curve of my waist and hips look like in the mirror, which half of my stomach is larger than the other.

I assume, every flight, that the airplane seat will not buckle. Once or twice, it was a close call, and I had to liquid my body into the seatback, suck in so hard my ribs ached, buckle the seatbelt so that it dug into my abdomen the entire trip and left deep red marks and bruises on my skin. Even now, the fear remains. I exhale every breath in my lungs and try to be as small as possible, as unimposing as possible, folding my elbows close to my side and clenching my thighs and knees together so I'm not spilling into the seat of the person next to me.

I assume that the lap bar on a roller coaster will not lock into place, and that I will again be asked to leave the ride and wait for my friends at the child swap. I assume that I cannot fit through turnstiles facing forward, that the armrests in movie theaters will dig into my waist, that attached desks in classrooms will not accommodate my body.

I try on a medium shirt and it doesn't fit, and I try on a double extra large and it doesn't fit, and I don't understand how I can feel like both at the same time.

My body undulates like a wave. My brain has never been able to keep up.

While cleaning my childhood home, preparing for a move that would never happen, my mom





told me over the phone that she'd found a Rubbermaid container with all our old Weight Watchers paraphernalia. She said that she would throw it all out unless I wanted it.

My first instinct was to say no. I didn't want that energy around. Nothing good could come from looking at the books, the scales, the motivational inserts. But when I moved away for college, I threw out the diary I had kept during the months right before and after I was outed to my parents. How I wish I could remember more than just vague feelings, hazy emotions. How the essayist in me knows the value of primary source documents.

I told my mom, sure. Bring them next time you visit.

The box was everything I knew it would be. Between her and me, eight different weigh-in booklets spanning eight years and our four different attempts at the diet program. Seven POINTS Finder trackers, for interpreting nutrition labels at the grocery store, and two POINTS Booster trackers, for knowing how many points were earned back after exercise. Handfuls of empty weekly trackers, where I'd written down the points for one meal, or two, or none. The plan changed every few years, so we had multiples of the first ten-week booklets. In 2001 it was Winning Points. 2007 was Turnaround, followed by Momentum in 2008. 2007 was also the addition of two different options, the Core Plan and the Flex Plan.

I discovered a *Complete Food Companion* and *Dining Out Companion* from 2001 and wondered how accurate the points calculations were for the plan fifteen years later. I wondered if the coupons in the back for Subway were still good.

Our weigh-in booklets were covered in silver stars, some on the front, some by specific dates, though I couldn't find a pattern. I got two stars on a meeting where I'd gained a pound from the week before. The stars had BRAVO in the middle, but I couldn't imagine they were congratulatory. My booklet from 2006 had four paper clips attached to the front, but I didn't lose four pounds, and certainly not forty pounds, so their meaning was also unclear. My mom's booklet from 2003 had a blue star magnet that said "I lost 25 pounds!" I couldn't find mine from that year, but I don't imagine it was a similar scenario.

I located the weigh-in booklet from when I was nine. May 30th, 2001: 113.4 pounds. The last entry from that attempt just six weeks later, only a two-pound loss. Then the one from when I was fourteen, some quick math telling me that I gained 130 pounds in those five missing years. The one from when I was sixteen, more of the same.

Each time I was heavier than the last. So was my mother. Each time we thought, this would solve our problems. Dig our fingers into the bruise just a little harder, eat fewer and fewer points and this time we'll come out of it on the right side.

Each time I failed worse than before, learned new ways that I was wrong, that my body was wrong. Even paying twelve dollars a week wasn't good enough to fix it.

At sixteen, I weighed 250 pounds and stopped attending horse camp because I was told that I was too fat to ride horses. I hadn't had a period in a year. My pediatrician admitted defeat and referred me to an endocrinologist who would hopefully get to the root of the problem. He inspected my body from head to toe, weighed me with jeans and shoes on, poked my armpits and neck and groin.



He hummed, sat down on a gray stool, and crossed his legs. *We'll have to run some tests to make sure*, he said, *but my best guess is Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome.*

The endocrinologist rattled off a list of symptoms I had which were associated with PCOS: excess body hair, hyperpigmentation and dark spots—acanthosis nigricans, not bruises—under my arms and on the back of my neck like a birthmark, lack of a menstrual cycle, the fifty-pound-in-a-year weight gain. *It's not why you're fat*, he said, *but PCOS makes it really really easy to gain weight, and really really hard to lose it.*

At the follow-up appointment a few weeks later, he confirmed the diagnosis. *Your hormones are all over the place, and your testosterone levels are incredibly high.* He marked an x on a chart. *Way off the line, see?*

Medication would help with the insulin resistance, but the best way to manage PCOS would be to lose weight. The less estrogen in my fat cells, the less testosterone coursing through my bloodstream, the return of my period. The less fat on my body, the less strain on my heart, a lowered blood pressure.

The endocrinologist left the room to write a prescription and grab information on the South Beach diet. My mom whispered excitedly from her place in the corner chair: *Once your testosterone goes down, you probably won't be gay any more.*

She sounded so relieved that there was a medical and not a satanic reason for my sexuality. I hadn't been tempted away from God by the liberal media or the gay kids in my public school, I was sick. Metformin would cure me like Lazarus.

My mother, a nurse since 1977, believed that the amount of testosterone in my body directly caused whom I wanted to date.

On the drive to Walgreens in her burgundy minivan, with the new prescription clutched in my sweaty fist, she offered up another explanation: *You know, I think that you think you're gay because you don't see yourself as attractive to men.*

I knew better than to argue, so I stayed silent.

I'm sure somewhere in that conversation she told me I was so pretty, that I had such a pretty face, that I was smart and kind and *only think you're gay because you don't have enough confidence, Megan. Boys don't want to date you, so you think you're not good enough for them. Your attraction to women is just settling*, a paraphrased quote from several Exodus International pamphlets in my bedside table.

She added, *When the medicine starts working and you lose weight, you'll be interested in boys again because they'll like you back.*

I crinkled the prescription in my lap, stared out the window and tried to make it seem like I wasn't craning my neck to look inside the gay bar we passed, even though it was broad daylight and no one would be there. I was desperate to observe others like me. Others who might want me. The idea of dieting became vindictive, revenge-oriented as much as self-motivated self-loathing. I'll show her, I thought, digging my fingernails into my thighs, scratching hard and upwards as they stuck to the leather car seat. I'm going to lose weight and have a body that other women will love.

I will never have the ideal queer body type. Or, I will never be able to tell when I achieve it, since I'm always striving for something more, something enough.

Queers did not call me attractive until I lost ninety pounds in my early twenties. I spent high school and the first three years of college as the desexualized fat friend, gay in theory but without the opportunity to practice. And then weight disappeared from my chin and stomach, and suddenly I was an option. Suddenly the roll of my back was more important than the rolls on my back.

I try not to think about it, but I think about it all the time—because that was the goal, wasn't it, Megan? To say *fuck you* to my mother, *I'll be thin and gay and prove you wrong*? Why am I so upset that I got everything I ever wanted?

My first kiss and virginity went to C—, a classmate senior year of college. They were the first person to call me pretty outside my family, and I drank up the word because to me it meant something.

We began an eight-month not-a-relationship, fraught and manipulative from the beginning, but I let it slide because feeling wanted after years of nothing was powerful, addictive. C— often cancelled plans with me to hang out with their other friends, whom I never got to meet officially, even when I dropped off alcohol I'd purchased for them when their fake IDs didn't work. I'd spend money I didn't have bringing C— Circle K slushies at 2 a.m. just for the chance to see them for five minutes, a hug at C—'s front door without inviting me in. Otherwise, I'd go weeks without seeing them, even after I'd finished undergrad and we both had the summer off, even though we lived less than a mile apart and both had empty apartments.

Each time we had sex, I'd shamelessly ask C— to mark me up so I could be near them, even in absence. *Please*, I'd beg with my wrists shackled above my head. *Bite me*, I'd whisper, batting my eyelashes, wetting my lips with my tongue. I'd say anything to feel their teeth on my shoulder and my breasts, popping the vessels and worrying blood just beneath the surface. Their mouth leaving unfriendly bruises that speckled my hips, my collarbone. Ones high on my neck that I forgot to cover when I visited my mother, *do you see this? I'm thin and gay and proving you wrong*.

C— would leave my apartment, or shoo me out of their apartment, as soon as we were done, never spending the night or letting me sleep over. I'd stand under the soft white light in my bathroom and run my fingertips over the fresh trauma. Think, *This is how it's supposed to be*. Close my eyes at the aching sensation. Painful. Powerful.

I'd do that for days, taking photos for when the bruises faded and I had to wait with clear skin and a boundless body for them to want me again.

I like my body more when it is bruised. I like feeling the ache sunk deep into the layers of my skin because I like feeling anything at all.

Even with bruises that aren't inherently sexual, there's gratification in poking my finger into the center, discovering that flash of discomfort as my flesh dimples. Yes, it's still there. Yes,



I'm still here. The pain travels down my spine then up, lodging somewhere in my chest. My nerve endings are still working correctly. I can pinpoint the edges of my body where typically they blur into thin air. A jolt of pain when I slide jeans over skinned knees. The residual ache in my toes from running too long on the treadmill in too-tight sneakers.

The invisible inner workings of my body becoming visible and tactile.

I can't stop touching my own collarbones, even when they aren't bruised. For most of my life I haven't been able to see my collarbones or feel them easily beneath the fat around my neck. Now, they rise above my body like sand dunes, and I rub and rub and rub. If they're still here, then I am still here. The motion feels wrong, what I imagine a cat feels like when pet against the grain of its hair. My fur ruffling. The sensation remaining, even after I take my hands away.

As a kid, I never understood how it wasn't painful for bones to just touch the skin like that, such a private thing on display. Body molded around bone, sharp and pointed.

Doesn't it hurt, I would ask my thin friends, gesturing to their collarbones. When they wanted me to clarify, I would gesture again and say, *That*.

Bruises linger longer on the sharpest, thinnest-skinned parts of the body. Pelvis. Wrists. Neck. Collarbones. Blood and bone and skin knitting together to create the most perfect image.

Nestled inside one of the Weight Watchers weekly plan booklets were two folded-up pieces of paper covered in Fourth of July clip art. They weren't dated, but given the neatness of my handwriting, I assumed I was either fourteen or sixteen. At the top, they read *Declaration of Th independence*, and contained a self-written mantra for how my mom and I would proceed in our diets from that day forward:

When, in the course of my life, it becomes necessary for me to end an unhealthy relationship with food and eating I know that I have enough strength to do that.

After all, I have a right to ____, ____, and ____.

My mom's: be healthy, exercise, and look good.

Mine: be healthy, look good, and eat what I want.

I shouldn't have to feel ____, ____, and ____ and I refuse to feel that way any more.

My mom's: guilty, depressed, a failure

Mine: tired, unhealthy, fat

I know losing weight is hard. I have an especially hard time with ____, ____, and ____.

My mom's: H20/milk, journal, veggies

Mine: portions, exercise, fast food

But it's worth it to me to dedicate myself to the task of losing weight, and I will do what it takes to meet my goal weight of ____.

My mom's: 130

Mine: 160





I am dedicated to my plan for weight loss, and to get there, I will _____, I will _____, and I will _____.

My mom's: pray for patience, follow the plan, make good choices

Mine: exercise more, eat right, lose weight

Now is my time, and I WILL make it happen. This is my Declaration of Independence from an overweight lifestyle. Let the fireworks begin!

Nana always told me, at the end of a meal, to leave a bite on my plate for the angels. I don't know where her saying came from. Maybe from living incredibly poor in downtown Columbus during the Depression. Maybe from hearing that a woman shouldn't eat her share, lest she seem greedy. Maybe from always giving ten percent to the Lord in church on Sundays.

I'd point to the garnish on my plate, a sprig of parsley, an orange peel. *That's for the angels*, I'd say, shuffling it around with the tines of my fork. Nana would say that the garnish didn't count. I needed to leave something real, something I enjoyed and wanted to finish.

But at the same time, Nana also always told me that it was a temptation of the devil to leave food on a plate. *Wasting food is a sin*, she would say vehemently. It made her sickest at a buffet, watching people's plates overflowing with uneaten food destined for the garbage. She'd say it about my uneaten half-piece of toast at breakfast, a handful of tortilla chips left in the basket at a Mexican restaurant.

It's not enough to take home, I'd protest. I'd explain all the reasons I didn't want it. After years, I switched to, *If you want it, then you take it*. She'd either get a Styrofoam container to take home the extra chips, or make me eat them, or make herself eat them, shoving them in her mouth before we left the table.

Gluttony was not the important sin, apparently. It was a sin to eat the angels' food, but also a sin to leave them a feast.

My mom blames Nana for her own "food addiction." I blame my mom for my eating disorder. The blame doesn't do any good, not really—it doesn't even make me feel better in the moment. Regardless of who's at fault, whether it's the matriarchs of my family or the billion-dollar diet industry, I'm hyper-aware of the food I put into my own body even when I don't want to be. Bruises hiding beneath the skin where you can't see the trauma.

While home for a week after my second year of graduate school, I watched my mom eat only a 100-calorie yogurt for breakfast and proclaim herself full. She was trying Weight Watchers again—they changed from PointsPlus to SmartPoints and a new Beyond the Scale program. The biggest innovation in fifty years, the website boasted.

The first thing my dad said to me: *Doesn't your mom look great?*, which he asked almost every day, as though he needed to verify with someone else, as though he couldn't get over how proud he was. I felt sick at the display, but I couldn't shake the way it sounded. How I wanted him to say it about me. How I didn't want anyone to comment on me at all.

One afternoon, nothing for me to eat at home—or rather, nothing I felt comfortable eating—I drove to McDonald's, ordered two hamburgers, took both buns off, and ate alone in my car in the parking lot. I didn't want anyone to see how I mangled them in ketchupy hands.





I counted the calories in my head, added them to my total for the day, and began planning what I could take away from dinner to make it all fit. If I could rip some of the extra tortilla from an already-diet microwave burrito. If I could mash cauliflower instead of potatoes. Then I'd be okay. Then everything would be okay.

I'm angry. I'm angry that my parents put me as a child on a rigid diet program, but I'm not really sure why I'm mad. Am I mad that Weight Watchers was the last resort? That people told a baby her body was a cause for concern? That at nine I'd already had such poor eating habits instilled in me that I needed a radical diet?

That I went through all of that at nine years old and still emerged a fat teenager, a fat adult who can't stop counting, who can't stop feeling wrong?

A ten-pound model of fat lives in the exam room of my latest endocrinologist. It's yellow, gelatinous, wrinkled. A melted brain. A rotten head of cauliflower.

When I picked it up, the slight tackiness suckered to my hands like the tentacles of a limp octopus. I cradled the model against my stomach, pressed it to my shirt. A layer of dirt stuck to its surface, probably from everyone picking up the fat, pressing it to their shirts.

According to a weight-loss app on my phone, I would lose nine pounds in the upcoming five weeks if I tracked every bite of food I crammed into my mouth. Confetti exploded around the prophesied number in pre-jubilation, like celebrating the New Year on December 1st. When I entered my fresh weight into the progress bar, the app requested that I upload a picture so my friends can match the number on the scale to the breadth of my body. I did not upload a picture. The app reminded me that I can connect it to Facebook. I did not connect the app to Facebook.

The endocrinologist wrote down my vitals and scheduled me for labwork. She asked how I felt about the hair on my face.

Eh, I said, I could do without any more of it.

She asked how I felt about my body. *Do you want to lose more weight?*

She was the first person to ask me, and it threw me off guard. *Yes, I said. I didn't know how to say anything else.*

Pretty hard for you to lose weight?

Yes, I said, but I've recently lost twenty-five pounds, and about seventy-five from my highest weight.

The endocrinologist hopped up from her stool. *Damn, she said. She gave me two high fives. How have you been doing it?*

I said what I always do, when doctors, friends, parents, acquaintances, people I haven't spoken to since high school bring it up: *Good ol' fashioned diet and exercise!* I spin it into a joke holding a beer at a bar, sitting at my work desk, poked and prodded by doctors. *It's amazing what eating a vegetable occasionally will do!*

The endocrinologist left to write a prescription for Spironolactone, to slow down the hair growth, and I hopped off the exam table, texted a friend that I was planning to steal the





fat model for an art installation. I glanced down at my thighs, restricted by tight denim, and recalled what they looked like when they carried ten more pounds of fat. I visualized another ten pounds taken away.

In five weeks, I could build my own model.

If I took a scalpel to my belly like butchering a hog, I could begin right now.

Bruises can occur at every level of tissue. Epidermis—the skin, dermis—sensory receptors, hypodermis—subcutaneous fat, muscle; bone. Blood leaks from damaged capillaries and pools into interstitial tissue, held in the body by flesh alone.

I looked up a model of the skin and fat layers. They resembled diagrams of the center of the earth. Crust, mantle, core. Every layer with a different purpose, a different makeup.

How thin the layers must be, since a paper cut results in blood.

After minor surgery on my thigh that required stitches, I took a flashlight and peered between the sutures, watched as the layers knitted themselves back together from the bottom up. Hypodermis, dermis, epidermis. Scar on the surface, even after the bruises healed, faded away. Vessels constrict, white blood cells repair damage. Hemoglobin degrades in the misplaced blood. It's purple to start, then green, yellow, brown, then nothing at all. Color fades with the pain. Press on the skin and it no longer aches.

Press hard enough and create another bruise.

M— always wanted to fool around, which during the honeymoon phase of our relationship made me feel desired, cherished, sexy. Even if we were only home for five minutes, she'd jump at the opportunity to shove her hands down my pants.

Driving back to North Carolina after she met my parents, constantly rubbing my shoulders while I flew up I-95. Changing into a different shirt in my room. Setting a timer until chocolate chip cookies finished baking in the oven. Groped while completing the simplest of tasks. But wasn't this domesticity? Wasn't this the flirtatious touches of rom-coms, love in little gestures?

As the weeks went on, intimacy seemed more like a chore, then a burden. Around the five-month mark, the idea of sex actively turned my stomach. I avoided my reflection when getting out of the shower, brushed my teeth and applied deodorant as quickly as possible so I couldn't stare at my sagging chest, the way water droplets clung to my underarm fat. If I hated looking at myself unclothed, how could anyone else want to touch me at my most vulnerable. How could I let them.

I feigned interest and comfort for a while. *This is how it's supposed to be.* I wanted desperately to want being wanted, to feel power in the same way I had before, but my own nakedness caused such anxiety that I couldn't pretend or lose myself in the touches and adorations.

The next time M— tried, I grabbed her hands in mine and sat down on the edge of the bed. *Look*, I said, trailing off while I rubbed my sweaty palms on the comforter. *I've gained some weight since moving here and I'm. Having a really hard time. With that and with my body. And I don't think I can. Have sex while I feel this gross.*





She rubbed the backs of her knuckles on my cheek, and I closed my eyes against a full-body shudder. *But you're beautiful*, she said, moving her hand to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. *My beautiful girlfriend.*

I cringed and shifted away from her, the words roughing down my back like sandpaper. *I just can't right now*, I said. *And maybe not for a while. Is that okay?*

Of course that's okay, M— said. She kissed my temple, conversation simple and over. We went out to dinner as planned, and I ordered a hamburger without the bun. With the weight of that admission off my chest, I felt like everything would work out fine.

When I broke up with her a month later, M— told me that she'd seen it coming. *You've been distant*, she said. I cried, and she cried, and we held each other on her bed while we talked through why I was absolutely sure of my decision.

And, she added right before I drove away, *I figured you were going to dump me soon. The sex really hasn't been good for a while.*

When I recounted this conversation later to friends, I played it off as a joke—*first of all, how dare you; I'm fantastic in bed; you'll never guess what weird shit I put up with from her*—but the comment seeped into my skin, down down down the layers to nerves, to bone.

Anxiety. Self-loathing. My naked reflection glaring full-body as I freeze in front of the bathroom mirror. Was this what she had wanted? Was I doing something wrong? Pinching the fat of my naked hips while twisting figure-eights. Doubting a partner's enjoyment of every future kiss and touch. Stiffing the way I sound. Hiding the way I look. This isn't what they want. I'm doing something wrong.

Maybe I am really bad at being queer. Maybe I am really bad at having a body.

I cannot find the line between diet and disorder.

To manage my PCOS, reduce the daily medication, stop diabetes before it starts, limit the hair growth on my cheeks and chin, I need to lose weight. I need to limit my carbohydrates, so I do, but sometimes I limit too much.

I avoid milkshakes for two years, and then I drink one, and the ice cream melting on my tongue feels like baptism. When my professors order pizza for the class, I wander away with my slice so I can scrape the toppings off, throw the crust in the trash.

After leaving C—, I told myself that I'd stop being so rigid with my diet—because it wasn't like being thin kept them around, anyway—and I gained forty pounds.

After leaving M—, I returned to the familiarity of dieting. I have to text my friend photographs of breakfast to confirm I haven't skipped it. I search for new recipes online that make my limited foods more interesting, but spend hours and hours looking through images of fitness models, before and after weight loss pictures, people with toned abs, people lifting weights, doing yoga, having bodies that will never be my body.

I tell myself that I am not my mother. I am *self-aware*. I am just on a diet. I'm eating enough most days, aren't I? Aren't I? I don't constantly talk about food. I don't comment on what others are eating. But I think it. I can't stop thinking it.





I'm worried that I'm just quieter in my disorder. After all, my mother thinks she's just on a diet, too.

I still think of the human body with the mind of a child, those anatomy models where the space between organs is hollow, like a game of *Operation*. When I realized that I can't just slice off my stomach to make it flat because there are organs there—all jumbled up on top of each other, overlapping, pressing and squelching together—I felt a genuine pang of sadness. One sharp blade and one quick trip to the ER couldn't solve all my problems. The ovaries, intestines, pancreas in the way.

Pesky.

Out of the blue, my mom texted me: *Hey let's both get tummy tucks next summer!* As a graduation present, I told myself, a reward for all of my hard work in school. Not a reward for shrinking my body. Not the way she shows her love, telling me I look good, telling me I could look even better.

I vented to my friend Martha about the nerve, the *audacity*, gesturing wildly with my hands. See what she does to me? It's all her fucking fault. I'm doing fine and then she says something like *this*, and it's back to the starting gate.

I texted back: *Mm, I'll pass, but thanks.*

I didn't mention, in the text or in the rant, that I'd already looked into tummy tucks on my own. The cost. The recovery period. I'd spent hours, days, weeks digging through testimonials on Tumblr, Instagram, plastic surgery websites. Wondering about the little bags to collect excess fluid from the incision site—how uncomfortable they must be. How everyone says that the pain is worth the happiness.

You can get a tummy tuck with or without liposuction, but with liposuction costs more and has a longer healing time. The surgeon has to sew your abdominal muscles back together, because with the expansion of your stomach they've warped and stretched. The scar goes from hip to hip, right at the pubic bone, so it's hideable under a bikini. When you're toned and flat, you're the type of person to wear a bikini.

I could even cover the scar with a tattoo once the inflammation went down. It's just another injection, after all—ink beneath the skin creating a bruise, creating a mark.

I didn't mention that I had already considered a post-graduation tummy tuck, taking out a student loan my last semester and saying *fuck it* to debt. How, no, that's such a bad decision—I should get breast augmentation first.

And maybe remove the dripping skin and fat from my upper arms.

And my thighs.

And my ass.

Bruise my whole body to make it worth touching again.

A family friend has been a Weight Watchers member for twenty years. It's a joke between my mom, Nana, and me, all of us taking perverse pleasure in someone just like us. *I think she does*





it for the social aspect, Nana says. *She does it because she goes out to breakfast afterward*, my mom says. *At least she's committed*, I say.

I do not have that level of commitment. My mom keeps going back to Weight Watchers but I bounce from diet to diet like one-night stands, because I am never not on a diet. Not since I was nine, and learned that eating less meant loving myself more. Weight Watchers, South Beach, Atkins, Keto, and now whatever you'd call this, whatever I'm pretending isn't actually an eating disorder. Foods I think, when I eat them, *I haven't had a milkshake in two years. I can't remember the last time I bought actual pasta.* Foods I eat in bulk. Modifications to pizza, cookies, hamburgers.

The body as object based on what I can and can't cram inside it.

One morning in June, I woke up, opened the tracking app on my phone to plan my food for the entire day, and it told me that I'd logged in for 360 consecutive days. 360 days of feeling guilty and not good enough, never good enough, regardless of what I ate or stopped myself from eating. I closed my eyes, so tired of counting and measuring and nothing adding up.

My hands fizzed when I deleted the app because in five more days I would have logged in for an entire year—*see, see how dedicated I am? I'll be thin and gay and prove you wrong*—but I did it anyway. I deleted two different running apps. I unfollowed fitness bloggers across all social media platforms, shoved my food scale to the back of the pantry so I couldn't access it easily. After I threw away my bathroom scale, which I used almost every day, I took the bag all the way to the outside trash can so I couldn't dig it back out. I forced myself not to dig it back out.

Into the Goodwill pile went all the jeans that hadn't fit for months, which I'd only been keeping around to compare to my new jeans, laying the smaller ones over them, lining them up at the inseam so I could see how much smaller my waist was, since my body in the mirror looked as terrifying and unwieldy as it always had.

Three days later, I confessed to Martha that I was not doing well. I'd been anxious because I couldn't weigh in, and I could hear the scale in Martha's bathroom like a siren song. We were going to the grocery store the next morning, and I wanted to buy some foods that I'd kept from myself, but I was afraid—actually *afraid*—of buying cereal.

Martha calmed me down, and together we made a shopping list, and I resolved to not only buy cereal, but one potato.

Once in my room, I rubbed cocoa butter all over my skin, watching the way my hands slid across my reflection. I used a nose strip and peered at all the weird little oily residues left behind. I washed and moisturized my face, brushed my hair.

I stood in front of my full-length mirror and recited one nice thing about every part of my body. For some, it was relatively easy. My thighs help me to walk, to run. My back feels nice under my hands.

For some, it took a few moments to think. Well, at least I don't hate this part the most.

What are you afraid of, Martha had asked downstairs, turning to face me head-on.





I stared straight ahead, dug my fingernails into my thighs. *Going back*, I said.

L— said, *Tell me a thing*, while I laid my head on their chest. My hair coiled into their armpit as their fingers swirled runes on my shoulder. We weren't shirtless, but in the spring-sticky silence I felt bared, new and raw and all of those hopeful-beginning adjectives.

I struggled to keep myself from going limp, afraid my dead weight would crush them, bruise their ribs, suffocate them. It was illogical. I wanted nothing more than to relax and shut down my brain, but I held myself propped on my left wrist and elbow.

What sort of thing, I asked.

Any sort of thing, L— said.

I struggled to think of wants and secrets that I had kept hidden during our countless repetitions of this game. I'd exhausted childhood traumas, favorite cartoons, least favorite berries, wildest high school theater pranks. The big ones I avoided, because I was afraid of the words lodged behind my tonsils: *If things were different, would you—Am I dateable to—I know you said not to get too attached, but—?*

Give me a theme, I said.

L— was silent, moving the hand on my shoulder up into my hair, their fingernails scritchng at the nape of my neck. After a long pause, they asked, *What do you like about being marked?*

A delicious, mouth-stamped contusion purpled on the rise of my collarbone. Several yellow half-healed ones splotched my tummy and lowest ribs. I'd surprised myself, allowing those. I was not usually so free with my torso. But L— had rucked up my shirt and asked so politely, their eager grin all teeth and tongue and soft eyelashes, that for the first time in years I didn't want to decline.

This is how it's supposed to be.

I shifted my arm to stop the pins-and-needles in my fingertips. *I like the reminder*, I said, *that someone liked me enough to leave a bit of themself behind.*

I did not confess: *you; yourself.*

I did not confess: That tomorrow, my seatbelt will press into the bruise and I will stroke the line of my jaw, find the throbbing, teeth-tortured muscle. That I will, for a moment, understand the boundary between my body and the earth.

