THOREAU'S BODY

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My parents were gardeners, though I am not. Even when they stopped loving one another, and the children they had loved together turned distantly into adults, my mother and my father continued to love the same thing: the gardens that each had planted and tended wherever they were. My parents' hopes for spring stir in my own body decades after the last garden they made together was sold to strangers, even though their coming undone from one another long ago almost certainly began with their bodies—those delicate instruments of love and of loss.

My father's business was the body. Our family meals were often held up while he finished making house calls, dispensing his potions from the big leather bag that he lugged from the trunk of the car and settled every night in the same spot on the floor of my parents' bedroom closet. Their hanging clothes *whooshed* as he elbowed them aside.

I had my own business with doctors—to whom my mother took me for dreaded shots and for the pink-dripped sugar cubes that freed my generation, the first in history, from fear of polio. I recognized on their office doors the two letters from which my father never loosed his grip, the magic formula he wielded: M + D. Those letters were printed on my father's checks, in his listing in the phone book, on the pads of stationery stacked neatly at the edge of the desk in his upstairs study. Next to the ashtray into which his overturned pipe spilled charred cherry-scented tobacco, my father kept a model of a human kidney. Two hinged plastic halves opened to blood-red tissue, revealing the molded cord of the ureter that wound between veins and arteries as smooth to my touch as toys. "Doctor Burton Jacobson," he always introduced himself, extending his title before he offered his hand.

My father was sidelined during World War II by his weak eyes. In photographs from when he was courting my mother at college, he's always the fellow in ordinary street clothes and thick glasses. The other girls' boyfriends pose in uniform. My father rarely spoke of the war years or of his 4-F status, of his unfitness to give his body in service to the last American war to be shared as a national mission.

In a beach photo taken just after the war, my father is wearing his medical student's white coat: the uniform that he finally won. Married a year, my mother is kneeling at the apex of the photograph, between her American-born mother-in-law at ease on the Lake Michigan shore in a blowing, flowered dress and her own immigrant mother clenching both fists around a dark, heavy-looking handbag as she faces into the sun. Against the washed-out sky, my father's white coat glows bright. He stands slightly apart from the others, a prop on the postwar stage where this freshly forged American family is claiming its first doctor. My father's eyes remain a mystery barely visible behind dense glass.

My father was one of the pioneers of the contact lenses that were developed in the years after World War II. They amazed him with the first truly sharp correction of his vision. But the fit of the first generation of mass-produced contact lenses had not yet been perfected; and when a lens popped out of his eye or blew out the open window my father would have to pull the car over to the side of the road, suddenly vulnerable and blinded, so that my mother could switch places with him and drive. The two of them would drop to their hands and knees at the next highway rest stop and search the car's shadowed, gritty floor, feeling in the grime around the brake pedal for the miraculous bits of plastic.

My father had printed a single line that he loved from *Moby Dick*, and mounted it on his study wall for inspiration: "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run." Yet—like Melville's leg-maimed Ahab—it was his own body that wrecked my father. A series of retina detachments proved impossible for his doctors to repair. First, one eye went dark, and he was forced to wear a black patch over it while his vision in the other steadily dwindled, until cataract surgery granted him sight for one final year. Then his heart weakened, that muscled chamber continuing to pump into his sixties while hoarding its secret weakness. From across the country my father told me over the phone that the brutal bypass surgery had saved him, but I suspected that his heart was headed for disaster just the same. Friendships beyond his ability to sustain, his last marriage ending in divorce, he was left alone with the one body for which his medical training had not prepared him.

Finally there was cancer. I rode with him from the hospital where surgeons had removed his bladder, both of us staring out the window in awkward silence as Lake Michigan slipped by in a blur. Chained in his wheelchair to the deck of the medical taxi, my father could barely hold up his head, and he skidded helplessly back and forth each time we turned the long curves of Lake Shore Drive. I touched my father's hand, cramped fearfully over the arm of his wheelchair, but his eyes were already closed, his doomed body distant and alone.

Who are we, imagining that the things we know could be forever? Just fifteen years ago my mother played tennis on the high school courts a mile from where she is lying now, at home with a broken pelvis and sick lungs. She counts the minutes she can breathe, remains tied by the hour to the oxygen that she carries like a papoose—the baby that feeds *her.*

This past winter she was back in the hospital in Chicago, coughing up blood. In New York, I tried to shut down the images clouding my mind's eye: my mother waking in the night, turning on the light to see red drenching the white tissue. Some days she felt fine, on other days she shivered as though she had a fever while when she took her temperature it was normal. Thinking and living in days. Following the body's calendar as though that was simple.

At the end of last year's visit my mother stood in her apartment doorway, waving goodbye as usual. She steadied herself with one hand against the door jamb, her oxygen tank backlit against the dining room strewn with newspapers and Post-it reminders, a dusky tunnel opening like a Vermeer in her framed wake. She told me she was slowing down, short of breath more often, that she knew it wouldn't be getting better and I must accept that. Fingers fluttering at her mouth, blowing kisses, she looked tiny as I headed toward the elevator and then to the taxi waiting in the street, the driver taking my luggage, slamming the trunk and then the car door beside his seat, starting up the engine without knowing a thing about me or about my mother. Touched by the hand of impending loss, I turn to watch the familiar streets unspool behind us—playing in reverse the film of my arrival.

Now my mother has turned into a wounded animal roaring in pain, barely able to move; anxious about oxygen, cornered, wary of nurses' promises of improvement. "I want them to tell me what to expect, and how to handle it," she pleads with me at my next visit, pulling herself up in bed so that she can meet my uncomprehending look head-on. When she first fell, she dragged herself to her feet without thinking, clinging to her walker as the front door clicked shut behind her, until the pain became too much and she crumpled again to the ground. Now she seems hollowed out, at once only her body and not at all the body she has known. She makes her slow way to the bathroom with the help of a nurse, clenching the handles of the walker, dangling a plastic bag of used Kleenex. "I'm not myself," she says, turning to me in tears. "I'm all broken down."

When my mother finally falls asleep in her room, I flee to the commuter train I used to ride for hours in high school, the cars plunging back into the city, north to south, following the lakeshore. The backs of the three-story apartment buildings along the way look exactly as I remember, their brick walls still scaled by frame staircases hung with laundry and flower pots. The same gray paint seems to be fading and peeling in the prairie sun, the same barbecues and bicycles and plastic lawn chairs parked on rear porches. We pass the old landmarks—Wrigley Field and the Aragon Ballroom—and the stop where I used to get off for work at my cousin's picture-framing store in the innocent years before he died of AIDS. Auto repair shops with cracked windows still hug the edges of the tracks. At Morse Avenue, I can see the hand-painted signs on the immigrant-generation store fronts that already looked tired forty years ago. Through the dusty train window time seems stubbornly stopped. But when I return to her room, my mother's body seems to be changing before my eyes, distilled down to unreachable pain.

Illness flings us back upon our old identities as bodies, onto ancient terrain that is at once barely remembered and deeply known. Dutch pathologists have discovered that fetal cells sometimes make their way from the uterus of a pregnant woman and implant themselves in the mother's own body. This counterintuitive journey is also made by other mammal species, confounding the trajectory of inheritance and our understanding of it. The shadowy illusion of our separateness tugs at me as I watch my mother's body suffer anxiously in her bed, feeling our destinies invisibly twinned, cellular.

Modern imaging plumbs the body's depths with radar, revealing a whole world beneath the surface of the skin: the way things work, and the things that can go wrong. Yet it also reminds us that the body remains a keeper of secrets. In remission, my blood disorder is invisible even under the most powerful of microscopes. During the year when it was slowly approaching, the clues it left confused us: the strange crackling and filmy rainbow that blanketed my vision without warning. It would be months before we learned to read the story my eyes were trying to tell, the sticky clumps of blood that were blocking the way to my brain. And then, scariest of all, the scrambling of language with no explanation, the aphasia—words launching from my mouth like clumsy tumblers.

Even now, as I look back and remember, my speech—precious part of me—feels wounded. We like to think of illness as an anomaly, a wrong that we hope to right. Yet isn't it wellness that's the illusion, the false promise: the fragile, hovering butterfly, lightness outweighed by air, life as short as a season, wings that can only continue beating for so long?

I am finishing a cappuccino in what used to be the neighborhood drugstore of my childhood, converted now into a coffee bar. Around me people I don't know read newspapers, order coffee, catch up with one another over breakfast.

What do these people see when they see me? A fattish, white-haired woman in jeans and black boots, her table and her sweater littered with crumbs from the pastry she ordered with her coffee. I am still breathing, my heart still pumping, my blood filling with oxygen as it used to here so many years ago. I can see the blue veins raised on the back of my hand—like my ninety-year-old mother's hand, weaving a crooked path over lumpy tendons just beneath the skin. A dozen blocks away, my mother's arms are patched with raw wounds that hardly heal because her skin is old and thin, but just like hers my blood leaves my heart and passes under the skin's surface. Narrowing arteries squeeze past the checkpoints of organs and muscle, sustaining the rosy color of my fleshy face and my anxious tapping fingers. Yet even I cannot see the stealth passages through which disorder enters my blood, making me sick. Illness sets its own calendar, collides unexpectedly with the present with a thud—silently, secretly changes course, holds the power to make everything different.

We live in a world of disruption: migrating birds thrown fatally off course by urban lights and noise, the seas rising as glaciers melt. In Miami, salt water soaks suburban lawns, fish swim in low-lying parks. Pluto has been demoted from one of the nine planets in the solar system that we see in the night-time sky to a large rock orbiting the sun! To be ill is, yes, to be similarly called out of the world that we count on, the reality that we take for granted. But it is also to be called more deeply into the world, to be immersed in its messiness and its movement, its ability to surprise and its mystery. Some mornings I lie in bed reluctant to open my eyes, as though that might prevent light from once again shattering against my will, from turning the world that I see into jagged pieces. I want to refuse the recognition that my body can go wrong without warning. The areas of the brain that control our most human functions—speech, memory, feeling—are called by neurosurgeons "eloquent," the most essential ones to avoid damaging as they cut. But illness too is the body's eloquence, its own insistent language: moving, and truthful.

At the triumphant completion of *Walden*'s cycle of seasons, Thoreau called out—hopeful and visionary as ever—"How then can our harvest fail?" During those two years at the pond, he learned to register nature's miracles on his body: to "hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where … the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground." It bears remembering, then, that *Walden* was the work of illness, that Thoreau went to Walden Pond in illness's grieving wake.

Love and loss were the tanglements that Thoreau was determined to clear at the pond. First came the tetanus that infected his brother John's simple shaving cut—setting his lungs into helpless spasm, leaving his locked heart drowning in fluid. Then what was, I believe, for Thoreau an act of love: his sorrowed body echoing the twisted grip that drew his brother into death, Thoreau nearly dying himself of a sympathetic case of lockjaw.

Beloved to Thoreau as well was Ralph Waldo Emerson's son Waldo, taken at the age of five by scarlet fever. Thoreau and Emerson saw themselves as American wild boys: Thoreau embarking on his journey at Walden on July Fourth, Emerson demanding "blood-warm" writing. Still, Thoreau's body would continue to unsettle him, the alien urge to devour a woodchuck raw suddenly taking him on a twilight trail, reducing him to silence. Within a few years of Walden he would make his way to Mount Ktaadn, pressing through uncut forests and whitewater rapids, clawing up the rubble to the mountain's fearsome summit. There—among the "gray, silent rocks," where human beings had left no trace—language once more abandoned Thoreau to his own shivering flesh, his loneliness remaining again unanswered: "I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me."

Illness is a mystery with which the body continues to haunt us. My cataracts came at exactly the same age as my father's, his legacy an old puzzle of sightlessness and isolation that I could not shake even thirty years later as I waited for surgery in yet another dull hospital corridor. I try to phone my mother in Chicago every night to ask how she is feeling; and when she remembers my blood disorder and the fatigue with which illness continues to dog me, she asks the same, though her diminished hearing quickly confounds the conversation. "I love you," I try to remember to tell my mother before I hang up the phone. "Love you back," she always responds when I do.

I am body, illness tells me: a physical, working thing, fearsome and fearful, the leavings of countless generations' hopefulness and disappointments. Flesh and bone, eyes and blood, hungry for woodchuck, the body can be broken, can draw us to one another, can mark the throbbing boundaries of our aloneness.

At a family funeral I watch mourners spill into daylight behind a loaded hearse, unready to release the body they loved into the grasp of death. Nor has illness readied me either to let go. Sometimes still a word floats out of my reach, leaving me wondering if it's merely a balloon I've unthinkingly let go, or rather a sign that I'm starting to fall apart like my father and my mother before me. Illness has made me hear freshly my own breath, intimate and necessary. "Diseases exist to remind us that we are not made of wood," Van Gogh wrote in a letter from the hospital where he struggled for a long year to recover his health. In the most famous of the paintings he made there, Van Gogh looked out through the window of the room where he slept—his body and his mind wounded—into a starry night sky that vibrated with color and emotion. The mystery of the world hovered before Van Gogh, glowing, inspiring his own swirling vision of beauty, the paint laid on thick as flesh.