

The Terror of Having a Body

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The man who holds no bitterness for his one-eyed son speaks to us so as we disband. I sense he has watched the protest from afar. I have been hovering on its sidelines with two others, trying to avoid arbitrary arrest. He approaches us and says by way of introduction, "My son lost an eye in the attacks. I just wanted to let you know that I hold no bitterness".

We stand in stunned silence. We live in new times where old etiquette can no longer guide us. My friend gathers the wherewithal to say, "I'm sorry?"

He repeats. Slowly, as though we do not understand the language. "My son". Hand to his chest. "Lost his eye". He indicates his own left eye with his fingers. "In the attacks". No gesture. "I have no bitterness". Hands down by his side.

Pause. "OK", my friend finally says cheerily, as though strangers regularly accost her with offers of redemption, as though she had inured herself to the fact that her very presence continuously wounds the world. "Thank you".

I say nothing, suspicious of this man's self-conscious demonstration of moral superiority to handy bystanders. His suffocating need for witness is studied, his soulful demeanour thus hostile. Has he considered what we are to do with the burden of his forgiveness?

We are taught how to respond to anger, but he does not confess to a quest for revenge. What do we do now? We would have been peculiarly vindicated, had he approached us with the demand to hand over an eyeball each. I have recently learned that the Biblical exhortation to exact an eye for an eye is, in fact, a command to limit revenge to what has

been done to you, not to exceed it. The scripture does not justify vengeance, but pleads that punishment should fit the crime.

But not even that, in these numbed, numbing times. Rather, we are saddled with his misplaced generosity. Did he choose us because we too were protesting planned revenge for the attacks?

Or were we suicide bomber emissaries by default, meant to convey this man's magnanimity directly to headquarters? Since we were not with him, we must have been against him, against his son, hiding missing eyeballs in sleeves, backpacks, the fragile organs so small, yet unfailingly encompassing all human beauty in blooming irises. In eyeballs we seek contact, crystal balls through which we hope to see our own future.

But crystal balls shatter. Humanity is obliterated, beauty broken. Why should sight, that most intricate of senses, be housed in so defenceless a ball, nothing more than glorified jelly, vulnerable to every piece of passing shrapnel? His son's loss of an eyeball is surely more the fault of evolution (or design) than anything we ; harried, bitterly ineffectual protesters ; could claim as our own?



Hulking men carrying machine guns protect my security. It is difficult, I have learned, to differentiate between lust and suspicion in people's eyes. Both looks are hooded, invasive ; the grasp in glances of leering recognition.

I meticulously shun eye contact, however. Communication begets miscommunication, even in silence, a danger I do not wish to risk with those armed. I know they are trying desperately not to look at me either. One is evidently embarrassed when I catch him watching me warily out of the corner of his eye. I am not supposed to be guilty enough to be nervous around him; he is not meant to be prejudiced enough to be nervous around me.

And yet, here we are, trapped in sidelong glances and racing pulses, ready to throw ourselves at one another at the slightest menace, at the slightest invitation.



Urban settings on edge with watchful alertness. A girl waits for the train on the platform. She carries her weapon for all to see. Blue lumps mottle her cheek, the right corner of her lip misshapen by swelling.

I am fascinated. Malignant tumour? Genetic disease?

She hangs back, leaning against a pillar behind me. She keeps herself deliberately aloof, her gaze scrupulously avoiding catching another. In battle, one cannot humanise the enemy.

This face captivates me, the spectacle of distant hostilities right here on my daily commute, a war raging closer than a television screen. I know she knows that she must be watched. I wonder how she prepares herself to bear the world uncovered.

But why should she not bare her truth? She is merely a mirror to our own decaying, dying bodies. But we do not want to see ourselves in her: we set her apart. She is deformed and defective, somehow *less*. Let men lose limbs in battles of political principle; women need only assault our senses to disappoint us. Amongst our fellow commuters, I notice a

woman who catches sight of the girl. Her face falls, an expression of resignation, disgust, pity flitting across it: *so this is what it must come to in the end.*

I feel protective of the girl. Do I shield her from my own intrusive gaze? Do I want to rush to her defence even though she shows no need for my intervention? Though she copes with the light of day by lurking against walls, in shadows, she has walked out into the world of her own accord; her eyes may be downcast, but she holds her head high. I want to kiss her on the lips (is it contagious?) and tell her she is beautiful.

Because she is, of course.



A photographer rakes through a morgue in the spirit of witness.

Bodies wrapped in plastic sheeting in close-up shots. Set alight at a protest.

I try not to gawk, but I do. Who set them on fire? Themselves? Others? Why? What did these sinews desiccated to straw yellow achieve, this suggestion that human bodies are nothing but string and hay?

Did they win what they wanted?

I return over and over again, appalled at my own fascination. My interest in these features flattened by flame, in nostrils narrowed by disintegrating flesh, is unholy. Although naked, with clothes burned or burned into flesh, which mother could recognise her child as at birth? She cannot look into the unseeing eyes, as lids have melted shut, eyelashes gone, pools of charred meat in the sockets ; have the eyeballs survived underneath or do they evaporate first? What smile can she identify when mouths are locked in grinning grimaces, lips fused with the gums over yellowed teeth ; were they always this shade or were they smoked to this hue? Does she see her child's embrace in the contortions of the body, the bizarre twists of muscle ; the product of chemistry or agony, muscles dehydrating, shrinking in heat or someone's pain, calcifying as they die?

A seven-year-old is temporarily under my care for two working days at the office. None of the pictures are at her eye-level. I am thankful, feeling compelled to protect the child from the reality of the world, although I am not required to make such weighty parenting decisions for her. All I need to offer is an avuncular tenderness to this child, whom I play with as a favour to a busy colleague.

But I panic. "What are those?" I imagine her asking quizzically. In the naïveté with which I imbue her innocence, she will not be able to distinguish the humanoid shape of the remains.

Entropy will not spare childhood forever. Who am I to protect her? But who am I not to? Do I callously, flatly, state that we are just meat, leave it to her mother to deal with the consequent nightmares? Should I lie, speak of it as a large feast of barbecued chicken?

How easily humans cook, exhorting us to vegetarianism or to cannibalism? Some mystics eat human flesh to underline that all is equal in the eyes of the divine, all creation is fallible, all material reality undifferentiated in its impurity. Not even we are sacrosanct, they remind us. Not even the human body is sacred, they say, dismantling our last great hope for religion.



We are a people accustomed to burning the body in death, and yet we are distraught at the indignity of having a statesman's charred ribcage and skull be flashed on national television, almost as if he had been caught in a state of undress. What is he doing on television *without his whole body on?*

A newspaper reports, heart-broken, on another statesman's death; a woman sobs that she only managed to recognise her beloved leader by the back of his head. His remains are protected from the glare of cameras by a coffin as it is set alight in order not to violate the remembered integrity of his body. We cannot destroy our secret faith in resurrection.



Death can come in a myriad ways; we do not argue with it once it arrives. Surviving is trickier. We are given a new body in birth by fire, conceived in rage, nurtured by flame. After a blaze at a major city station, there are articles featuring survivors. One tabloid rends hearts with a story about a woman who waits by her lover's bedside, "even though", the story sighs, his once long, guitar-playing fingers have been reduced to scorched stumps. The story obliquely commends the woman for her generosity in committing to this stranger, this demon lover who emerged from hell to claim her as his own.



Bodies broken by bombs. People try to reassemble what remains into a semblance of the person who no longer exists, as though this jigsaw puzzle were all that keeps life together. The media flashes images of bystanders huddled in conference as these pieces lie at their feet, unable to understand where that last piece has gone, as otherwise they'd have him back together in a jiffy, dammit.

Where is the blood? Either this man exploded in a very considerate manner, or he has died a while ago, blood thickening. He has broken up very neatly, as though the human body were riddled with fault lines, predisposed to fracture at those junctions where it has been hastily patched together when shattered before. His face is handsome, long lashes covering his eyes. His hair is still scrupulously styled. It is somehow hard to believe he is dead.

His head is resting on the upper jaw, as his lower jaw and chin are nowhere to be seen, not even attached to the throat and shoulders which lie next to his head, his limbs arranged in careful pieces below. Maybe it is just the lower jaw his friends are missing in trying to put him together again. How cruel the irony: even if he were to open his eyes, he would have no jaw to use to demand that it be returned to him.

It is a photograph in the newspaper. Would the man's wife recognise her private knowledge of his body in that picture, his incessant, climactic martyrdom replayed constantly in the public's imagination? Those of us who can afford to consume the frailty of human life as we casually sip our tea in the morning, perusing our highbrow press, can be horrified at the outsourcing of our political struggles to people with barbaric methodologies. Others have to live the consequences. The titillation the media duly produces for us flaunts our own undignified privilege. We can continue to recoil in polite horror at one-eyed faces,

four-fingered hands, mottled cheeks, ravaged skin. It is not chance that has kept us together; it is the leisure of shelter, of not having to risk more than swollen tendons or a paper-cut in reading these words. Our delicacy is a luxury. Fragility does not survive through luck; it can only be bought with crisp, crinkling cash.



An aerial view of a shattered street. It is dark; only streetlights pool in certain corners. Damage stretches the length of the road. Emergency personnel mill about in clusters. From a distance, they seem rather casual, amiable. I can imagine them cracking jokes in the still evening air. In the shadows, I spot two bodies. Where is the rest of the death toll? I squint. The two in view seem too whole to be bombers. One lies in his leather jacket. He has fallen flat on his face, his arms placed as though put out to break a fall he knew was coming, as though he is just about to get up again. It will be difficult, as he only has one leg. I cannot find the other leg lying anywhere in sight. Who took it?

A little bit away, another outstretched figure lies in the middle of the street. I can dimly discern a jacket; his upper body is lost in shadows. My imagination exploits this rich absence of material. I do see his legs clearly, as they lie in the light, in shorts, his sport socks and sneakers clearly visible even in this blurred, distant photograph in newsprint. I try to delineate his form, but my eye can only make sense of it if I assume that the blur at his midriff hides that he has been separated at the waist. I am not being gory; he cannot be that tall. Can he? He has nice legs, though.

Had. I shift uncomfortably. I am obscene. But I do not like referring in the past tense to something I can still see, pretending it is no longer there. But once we are dead, we cease to possess. Even beauty is no longer ours.



Skins stained black, brown, red and yellow are already marred. We only gasp in horror at the desecration when blood splatters or water wrinkles white.

We obsess about these double standards, forgetting that this guilt centres attention on us yet again, assumes our laxity is still central when everyone else has moved on, moved much farther on.

Remember Hiroshima, we intone every August. Remember that the terror of having a body is not new.



We claim that some spread death by violence, others death by illness, but denying that we really carry our end within us. Others may think they have killed us, but the victory is false, we were all dying long ago. The accidents that cut lives short are not accidents at all, nor do they cut lives short. It is natural, normal, for lives to end senselessly, abruptly, absurdly. The real freaks of nature are those who, by one long series of flukes, escape the relentless logic of mortality. They are those whom probability misses all their lives, which

they accidentally live for decades until the quiet end in bed, all their organs and appendages intact. Youth worship is such an aberration, an abomination ; age is the honour, the glorious ludicrousness of having survived.



Soon, a generation of bodies born in war will populate our tribes. Our conceptions of a whole body will shift to embrace these new shapes awkwardly. We are global citizens, as we are tirelessly reminded. But we are global citizens who leave bits of ourselves wherever we go, nonchalantly dropping body parts in careless explosions in Buenos Aires, Washington, Helsinki, Cape Town, Delhi, Manila ; until our passport, our citizenship, will be marked by our headless, limbless torsos, perforated and patterned with scars.

And embrace we will. No longer the leper colonies! Now, we notice appealing fragility; we want to conquer what we consider already vulnerable in order to assert their own invincible power. Now, we watch survivors of war, wide-eyed at the glamour; those of us who have never had to confront it secretly wish to possess this sexy will to survive for which our flabby, complacent bodies have never had the need. We want to possess triumph, to dominate the indomitable.



At a conference, a friend introduces a man to me. He is an activist from a Latin American movement. I immediately colour his life with all the political intrigues and machinations that I assume this involvement means ; drug mafia and guerrilla resistances, for example. I am sitting down, and he smiles amiably down to me from his great height. He sticks out his right hand.

I watch the smile in his eyes fade in the split second I hesitate as I register that the top of his index finger had been cut off, the digit is nothing more than a stump. In that instant, I remember a Roald Dahl character who has no thumb. Her grandson gruesomely muses that a kettle steamed it off. Although perhaps, he speculates later, it was lost in torture in some battle against evil.

Why do I assume this man's missing phalange is the result of some heroic sacrifice to principle? Why not a domestic dispute?

I am sure that I am graceful enough not to recoil perceptibly, but his reaction ; he must be sensitive ; belies my confidence. I swear I will now steel myself before every potential handshake. *The hand offered may not be like yours is now, I recite, but shake it anyway.*



There is a man on the train who limps. Two friends who do not limp accompany him. They are Somali, I decide. We neurotically see Somalia everywhere. I try to imagine this lagging man in a dusty, dry street far away. In my imagination, Somalia resembles a country-western movie set. The man does not limp there. What made him limp, I speculate? A bullet in his back? Noxious gases in his nerves? Shrapnel in his skull? In the right hemisphere of

his skull. I refine my hypothesis: his entire left side cruelly trails his intentions.

He has to have been made this way by an act of man; he cannot have been born this way of woman. We do not live in a world where such things are explained away as fate, we do not believe in such unseemly lack of control. Our bodies are who we are, after all. Beauty is an accomplishment, a credit to the person for staving off deterioration, degradation. On the day of judgement, no one will need to have asked how you lived. Your body cannot, will not, lie.

This man's body does not lie. Bullets we bought bludgeoned Somalis to death. Their war-wounded in wheelchairs are now welcomed to these shores in hand-wringing, collective guilt. Their bodies are a memento to how fragile our own humanity, our own wholeness is. As they arrive, maybe we who have been sheltered too long will understand that wars are lived daily, that daily life is war.



Wardrobes are the frontline. One man and three women board the bus with a baby. Two women have covered their heads. The third ; the smallest ; is completely covered from head to toe in a black robe, slits for eyes. Everyone is curious, but is pretending not to be. The women sit. The man stands with the baby in his arms ; how liberated of him, I can see some people thinking. And yet, why does he demand these double standards for his women? Is the swathed one his wife, so completely his, so wretchedly beautiful?

Or did she choose it for herself, out of that obsession to obliterate bodies? The unknown unsettles us. Who knows what she hides within her? Surely it is too warm to wear that layer. This is no desert climate, where women need to trap water against their skin. Did she leave home firing off that staple punchline Arab comedienne have made famous, "Does this *burqa* make my bomb look big?"



I watch a man mutter aloud as he holds open a little green book on the bus. Why is he talking to himself? I eye his briefcase suspiciously. No one is allowed to carry anything with impunity these days. In fact, I imagine everyone would be happier if we were simply to walk stark naked through the streets. Having a body itself is incriminating, it will reveal its answers: just apply duress.

This man's skin and mine are meant to align us in an axis of solidarity: our bodies have become our belonging. But I betray it; I stumble to leap off the bus before his prayer takes us with him, closer to his god. Public prayer in these parts can only mean trouble. I watch the bus continue trundling along the artery, refusing to explode.



We burst both into song and flame. The body has been a work of art, long before it became a weapon. He walks as though he has forgotten what it is to be afraid in one's skin. He walks as though he has forgotten how afraid others are of his skin. He warbles soulfully to himself as he walks ahead of me. I catch snatches of music. I watch his hips shift slightly

to the beat. I admire his courage to inhabit space as though nothing has changed. He reclaims his body as an instrument of pleasure, inviting us to trip the dangerous fuse between hedonism and death.



A woman in the market smiles at me. She has no reason to, we are merely pawing through the same oranges, but she looks up and smiles. I smile back reflexively, unthinkingly. But later, I want to track her down amongst the dairy stalls to smile back with conviction, with gratitude. Some would claim that her smile was a pre-emptive strike, catching me off guard in case I were about to attack. But I know she did not see violence seeping out of my pores; I do not exhale destruction like some latter-day deity gone berserk. She just smiled, without fear, without suspicion.

Our bodies loom threatening, dying. Yet how did we evolve ; who designed us so intelligently ; that this small chorus of tendons, this intricate assembly line of sixty-odd facial muscles, wins us redemption?