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Preserve Her Form

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PRESERVE HER FORM

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Hannah Morgan

May 2017

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Hannah Morgan
(digital signature)

05/08/17

preserve her form
h. scott morgan

INSIDE

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For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands. We grow weary in our present bodies, and we long to put on our heavenly bodies like new clothing. For we will put on heavenly bodies; we will not be spirits without bodies. While we live in these earthly bodies, we groan and sigh, but it's not that we want to die and get rid of these bodies that clothe us. Rather, we want to put on our new bodies so that these dying bodies will be swallowed up by life. God himself has prepared us for this, and as a guarantee he has given us his Holy Spirit.

Paul the Apostle
2 Cor. 5:1-5 New Living Translation

PREPARATORY

I am not obsessed with you – with hating
and grieving you in circulation, and the terror
of forgetting – anymore. The ceramic jar we chose
was gorged with you until the ash spilled
on the dining table and yellow-mahogany piano
after the million granules made us restless
and Mum, yielding to the terror of forgetting,
began to move the dense baggie from one jar
to another, patting your culmination into a more
fitting shape. You had never been so pliant
as then, but still you heaved an obstinate cough
of grey on the piano, so now the jar lid fits snugly
and I have forgotten enough that I know remembering
is not necessary. I am not obsessed, but I could be.

Not necessary: I am not obsessed, but I could be recalled to it. When Judas was resurrected – I'm thinking of Lazarus. When Lazarus was summoned a fourth day dead, the crypt sent his sisters a bandaged man. What was the condition of the body? Beneath layers of frankincense-soaked tatters, do we suppose the bronzed skin stayed taut, a supple brain and heart kept slick with lukewarm reds and blues on grey, channels of blues with red entwined like dormant roots holding their turgid sustenance, unleaking and safe-buried six inches down, until the soil warms or was his body already emptying? How much was left to shudder awake at the muster? How much is it forgivable to criticize a carefully wrapped gift?

Is it forgivable to criticize a carefully wrapped gift
when I am sole witness of the unveiling, acrid
bandages falling? No one can speak of you
like I can, and no one seeks it, that story. My death
volunteers me: I could seek it again, I suppose
resume my leaning into the strongest wind.
It will be the dry cough a mahogany bulb gives as it
presses its last reserves into white roots at the first
inspiration of heat. I have resurfaced a half-decade
of springs, and if there is no water, I will have nothing
but death in layers, many many papery skins.
Four days have been my rest, then you ask for me.
Bandages must escort this body from the tomb, until
I am not obsessed with you, with you.

MANY MANY PAPERY SKINS

A dead person forgets the body first:
obedience to mechanisms of skin,
the needing; she forgets thirst

and relief, how hairs disperse
in wind, a hundred thousand embodiments.
downside-up roots. A dead person forgets first

how anxiety is physically immersive
and fingernails are pleasant, pale crescents
against a scalp; she forgets thirst,

the satiation: what do the dead have, rote relief?
rote relief? our deadness is different: the dead get existence
without need; a deadened writer forgets

a dead sister forgets a perimeter
of bodies: daughters, son; sister sister mother father
many many bodies are quenching memory, forgetting.

They think they remember:
the dead person's hair was red as emergency
before the skin was compelled blue, the first body
a deadened writer came to forget, I came to forget

LEARNING TO GIVE
BLOOD

Plasma Sonnet

When she[†] defends her history,
my mother uplifts her arms
at obtuse angles like worship, except
she is looking at the elbows:
*We were piss-poor, and they paid –
extra if I gave twice in a week.*
If it let us survive, I did it she narrates
while we look at the surrendered elbows,
blue roots beneath packed layers of scar
tissue presented to us as memoir, we read
about our mother and her daughter;
I survived. The wrists of the angled arms
roll back: more blue. The fingers
curl inward: wrinkled red, white.

[†] Widow of addictions; at the time, her daughter was three
or four, we guess. We do not need to ask questions like that.

Pulse Sonnet

I ask the question, and all bravery drains
from me before he answers *Yes*.

We become thus bound. But
when he next hugs, he hugs
a husk – when he places hand
on head, the shell shivers like an arm
paling in the ambulance[†] jostle,
he straps it with blood pressure cuff.

This anxiety is unexpected. I cannot ask
whether he ever cradled a bluing hand.

Avoiding a mesh of fingers, I take
the elbow, thrilled by what goes out of me
too fast. He checks the wrist for a pulse again
and again and together, we are hopeful.

[†] Volunteer Rescue Squad. He describes the work in mixed words:
thrill, compassion, sobering. Most often: *I can't answer that*.

Dead Body Sonnet

There is a dead body clapping
at church. Skirt-draped legs droop
to the floor, and her hands clap:
white arms lifted in half-way
angles when brown arms lift all
the way like a forest. The dead
body cannot cry out in reverence
but she can hear: *Uncover
our eyes! Unblock our ears!
Make our legs to walk!* Droop-white legs
walk this body to the alter for arms[†]
outstretched to grasp the dead head, cry
prayers into her hair; behind her
the swaying and crying forest of arms.

[†] Bishop arms outstretched. His name
was not remembered. Or maybe not understood.

Intensive Care Sonnet

Twice in close memory –
I have offered
God permission to collect
my soul and dismiss

the body: once[†], when the blood pouring and puddling
around my re-formed vertebrae was swallowed by sucking
tube, cleaned, and re-gifted to the roots – brain-draped
with liquid weight pumped in at the elbows:
because swallowing was worse – and the night we were at angles:
I stared through his stare, split
the gaze to his hands; pain
now spilled from two bodies.

[†] adolescent idiopathic
scoliosis, three curves – 49°
major arc, age 17 and unstable.
Recommendation: posterior spinal fusion

DREAM SEQUENCE

I

Last night I dreamed of my mother
and the blemish at the center of her back
I have wanted to pick away when we palm
our skins with sunscreen. It was growing a plant.
The dark seed at the center of her back
had sprouted one broad green leaf and a throng
of smaller leaves, they leaned away
from her skin, and I would not touch it
because we cannot afford another surgery.
She put on a shirt, which tented at the plant
on her back. Later, I contort my arms
to touch the plant on my own back –
it is substantial.

Telling no one, I have my body
 bend at a perfect angle, becoming a table
with a garden (I am the table, I am beside
 the table) soaked in sunlight. My fingers
plunge knuckles deep to find roots, red and easy to pull leaving

 big gaps that I suture closed with my palms
 in a squishing motion like applying sunscreen
I remember hoping I don't remove anything vital

II

From time to time, I slide awake thinking
the item I was holding in my dream has slipped
down the crack next to the wall –
to get to it, I am peeling back
the bed covers like I'm a surgeon sifting muscle,
my patient is dying on the floor below
my flailing arm and clenching fingers.
When she comes to wake me, I tell my mother
I am looking for something I need.
She severs the curtains and turns away, saying
It's just a dream. You're doing that thing again.
and I growl, *No, I am not. This is real.*
I have lost something I need.

I

The grains of the body of my sister are in the clay vessel on our untuned, yard sale piano. Miss Henry, a widow with wrinkling hands, taught my sister to play. When did the lessons stale and cease? Mine lasted two weeks before Miss Henry's soul left her creased fingers, and hers was the first funeral I can remember keeping away from the coffin threshold as my mother dictated.

I took up flute in the fifth grade as family history dictated, when my sister was again the unmarried pregnant. The vessel I inherited was bruised where the metallic veneer remembered her thumbprint, chafing silver with arch and whorled wrinkle. By the time her daughter received it, a beige spot marked the left thumb's resting place, the tube held eighteen years of breath staled.

II

My family devours one half-loaf a day, faster than bread can stale,
and my mother is baking weekly. She claims the name Esther dictates
her culinary giftedness; the namesake grandmother and aunt left
a legacy she adopted. Of her many daughters, she expected vessels
for legacy, but while we watch the kneading hands thin and wrinkle
we dip our inheritance in olive oil, eat the slick, unsticking memories

as indulgence, until we learn the need to mourn memory
as much as flesh, mourn how a body rejects reminiscences staled
by the draining of blood from deep-channeled brain wrinkles.
She survived the surgery. Now, a daughter records recipes by dictation
while mother touches the dough, lifts the blue-glass vessel
of oil and cries out *How is there so little left?*

III

A click, and she clutches her knee with the left
arthritis-numbered hand until neither left nor right remembers
whether it grips flesh or dough, the warm vessel
she was going to knead. She murmurs and stalls:
I'm not sure I'll make it, the knee dictates
about a daughter's recital. The right hand squeezes dough, unwrinkling.

IV

Weeks of my sister's death gave our mum an unfamiliar body: wrinkles deepening their channels around her eyes, wakes left by wakefulness, memories replace dreams. Faith dictates a hope, and to that end, we sometimes forget to mourn. Grief pours from us slowly by the year, wine from stale wineskins, our overstretched vessels.

V

Playing after a year hiatus, blood vessels rise as ten fingers wrinkle, knead keys. Staleness from harrowed lungs: how little is left? I think there isn't anything. But memory tenses, at once dictates sound.

NOW I AM WALLOWING IN THE CHAOS

everything written from this memory has been lie
but my hand didn't know it was a lie,

when I wrote; though the throat knew, it was
the wrong part of me that knew it was a lie

and now I've told, my brain is mourning
softly (because she did not see it as lie

in telling, it was memory – it seemed
like memory to claim this obsession, to lie

forever in the grey ashes of the dead
that were gifted me) – memory becomes lie

like the unbroken becomes broken:
as cleanly as a small female body lying

facedown on a sterile table is scalpel-plied
from whole into half-loaves; or as a mind lying

in a blood-encased brain subsides
into latency before the surgeon lays

drill to her shorn scalp; or as a young heart
seizes. as the heart withholds and lies

ceased. as white skin flushes blue: cleanly.
memory in a typeface body becomes lie:

betrays itself, betrays its lineage, denies
its God. the heresy of pressing truth into word.

there is no true story in me but the one in which
the body grows stiff and blue from lying

still and the soul triggers a panic, Rise! Rise!
still the stiff blue body only lies

and considers the linoleum under-face,
the beige grain. this is lying

prostrate, but also this is stubbornness, so
stubborn: there is persistence in lying

for this long; and there is strong refusal:
you say God I hate this body lying

in the middle of my kitchen, but also
I am nothing without this lying

body, absolutely nothing, please Almighty
preserve her form, preserve the wasting, lying

bodies of ours, bulb husks that they are,
beckon us from our half-hidden lying

and the souls will come – grace willing it's true
the souls will then come – in this hope, I lie and lie.

LEARNING TO GIVE
BLOOD

Alive Sonnet

I pretend if—
my sister were alive—
we would be friends—
I would be brave—
and fight her with my mouth
and not like her husbands who tore
her body with their bodies: my mouth
could make her cry and repent this time
she would cry she would repent
she would be impressed
and let me hold
her hand, we could
eat cake to celebrate her
death day[†] together

[†] January 16, 2011.

Rolling Vein Sonnet

I think I am brave: after the pinch, I choose to watch
the crimson piping away of myself.

I think I am brave: the chord is warm – I think
I am a hot beverage dispenser.

On days I wish to dispense my blood alone,
I cannot stop him from following:

His vein always squirms below the needle,
away. Three false sticks

before a good one. I learn to be satisfied with one stick, to lift
my legs, ask for water, drink the offered juice;

I think he learns to clench
the bulb, his teeth, we learn to say more with our eyes:

I am the rolling vein[†],
as the red pipes away from our trembling white elbows.

[†] I think I am brave: but how much
does skin welcome the needle

Skin Sonnet

These are what I remember of my sister, her tattoos:

Rag—Doll, a word on the flesh of each calf
Venous pumpkin on the lower back, it grinned menacing
yellow: these days she would be scorned
Coffin on a finger of her left hand: her marriage
prophecy, deaths foretold
Dragon across the breast bone
There was a homemade tat on an arm I cannot envision
There were names of her children – all three? :
Seraphim
Morgana
Lydia
†

At the end, there was a Venus of many colors at her wrist:
(two weeks before her death, and I learned about
her lover from a wrist)

These are what photographs help me remember:

Wide expanse of tan skin
The sharp whiteness of a smile I would not trust
Deep earth-brown hair overlaid with plaits of pink
Long, angular arms raised in pride and glamour

† These are what I envision but do not believe existed:

Egyptian ankh
Delilah (the daughter of a husband)

I AM A LINEAGE OF FALSE STARTS, MISCARRIAGES,

I am a lineage of false starts, miscarriages,

I am a lineage of false starts, heart
disease, brain blood, scoliosis: our spine-stalks grow
one way, then rotate toward the light fluttering
red and white red-white

A lineage of false alarms and sirens,
tunnel vision pinching to a pinprick, little puncture
portal; everything else: red pixelated dust

of false starts, monologues
are better than dark reds, than doubt. Monologues
quell coronary stutters

starts and involuntary ends

In us: two of each chromosome.

In us: misplaced blood
misshapen bones
misinterpreted futures

In us:
we can only offer: untamed anxiety, disobedient
bodies, incurable whiteness, blue eyes,
hesitation – no. of this gene, we have also
history and rebellion.

Let us celebrate our unfitness for the life ahead.

PROPHECY DRAFT ONE

Thesis: God wants the end times like I want you, like I want a deep-lung cough to rid a choking spit glob, like I want to put bread to my mouth and consume consume, like I want to remember how to pray earnestly. God wants the end times like I want isolation, my broken body away from every other broken body. Which is desperately. Until I achieve it, and then it is desperate unwanted. God wants the end times like a young scoliotic woman wants to fall asleep on the surgical table: they want the mending of bodies. Until the mending is permanent. Perfectly mended, perfectly. And our spines won't choke our organs, and we cannot arch our spines. We are the scoliotic woman. God is the surgeon. The anticipation: this is the closure, the suturing of millennium-old wounds; this is the reconciliation of skin-half to skin-half. The dread: here is the second beginning. Will the stitches hold?

In the beginning, there was: no beginning. There was the Word, and He had existed an eternity before there were days. No days. No bodies. There was harmony, which is perfection, and it was good and it was good and it was good and good and good and could only ever be good. There was love, and from love is always creation, which is also called beginning, which is also called ending. And there was a before, and there was an after – the first beginning.

At the beginning, everything made was excellent, prognosis satisfactory. Until unwanted complications triggered acute ungood: it developed rapidly, no clear root cause, no clear symptoms. Eden was autopsied and we still don't know exactly what happened, must have been a fluke. Ungood happens from time to time. Probably was unpreventable... I'm sorry for your loss, the Word murmured in the moments after the first body began.

Our bodies began in this second eternity. Mostly, there are small beginnings and small endings. When my body is most fearful, the Word shows me this: a beach; the texture of sand against unclothed feet, the texture of wind over me and over these endless gathering-ungathering waters.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone...

In the end, there will begin the third eternity. There will be a new heaven, a new earth, and a sea of new bodies. To each mended soul, an unbroken body. What won't we gain? We will gain harmony, health, immortality, infinite light. What must we lose? An understanding of necessity, darkness, yearning. Must we lose the sea?

“It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega — the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children. (Rev. 21:1, 6-7 New Living Translation)

In the third eternity, there will be no death or crying or pain. But there will be tears. We will be looking at the outspread fingers of our unblemished body when the seawater trickles from our eye. We won't beg for surgery or resurrection, but to understand the tears. The Word knows why the tears come and cannot unknow it.

Here is a new prognosis: the third eternity will not remain an eternity. It will be good until a crimson droplet ripples the sea slumbering. A new pending end the Word has been expecting.

At the end of this end and at the crest of the next beginning, the bodies that have been forgotten will be remembered. The next beginning will remember grey ashes, mahogany pianos. It will be unwanted, expected, preventable. It will be permitted.

Conclusion: Eternal complexity as the only treatment to preserve imperfect good: death and mending, death and mending. A method of harmony. At every new beginning will be the unsoundness of bodies. What is fixed? God, the Word, and the wind across gathering waters.

PROPHECY DRAFT TWO

In the beginning, our parts were due to fail: my spine would buckle in two then three swelling angles; my older sister's heart would withhold another pump; my mother's skull would need a draining. We bleed to mend, cede to skewed bodies, proceed to end:

when we raise our arms, we try to defend our own bluing, bending, our lying still, hesitation, and forgetting; this body feels the emptying and dying as a new blade carves a new body; the old bulb cleaves by the next sprout piercing the next eternity and from each tomb there is wholesome leaf.

