

ROCHELLE HURT

An entrance, an exit, an entrance

All our interest is centered in the rough setting of the diamond, that is to say, in these bodies of ours.

—St. Teresa of Ávila

Before she was a saint, Teresa was a masochist.

In Bernini's sculpture, her eyes are closed, her head slung back, her jaw fallen slack. The folds of her garment overwhelm her like water, but a limp hand surfaces at her side, and her feet peek from beneath her hem. Their placement suggests that her legs are slightly open. A baby-faced angel stands over her with a closed-lip smile, lifting a fold of fabric near her hidden breast. In the angel's right hand is an arrow, held back but pointed toward the middle of Teresa's body. The tension between the marble crevices of her gown and the tip of the arrow forms a taut, invisible string. The angel is withholding, and she loves him for it.

Teresa said that the angel in her vision "appeared to me to be thrusting [the arrow] at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it." She *could not wish*—as if her very *will* to feel desire had been taken. Prayer as sublime debilitation; debilitation as divine aspiration.

In the diagnostic procedure known as fine-needle aspiration, a thin needle is inserted into the skin like a question, a prayer swiveled gently against a piece of tissue until coated with cells and removed. Beneath a microscope, the body answers; revelation is what the patient aspires to.

After my first biopsy, I fell backward, letting the leather exam table catch me. The heady echo of the needle's scrape against my thyroid tissue lingered in my ear, a nail on slate. For twenty minutes I couldn't lift or turn my head; my neck was useless. Through pain, my body was subdued. To comfort me, the nurse said the girl in the next room who'd had the same procedure was crying, too. We were allowed some recovery time before returning to the waiting area. Cloistered, we lay swooning like mystics in adjacent rooms.

The mystic, says E. I. Watkin, seeks a radical transformation of will. She does not simply escape the body, but transcends the realm of earthly desire altogether. This kind of prayer assumes that there is some essence of self—a mind, a spirit, a soul—that can be distinguished from and maintained without the body.

Descartes severed the self in two: the mind, which has will; and the body, which functions as an extension of the will (insofar as we can will our arms and legs to move). Having neither understanding nor will, the body cannot represent human nature. He draws an analogy through the movement of stones, comparing the mind to gravity and the body to the stone: if gravity causes a stone to move toward the center of the earth, he argues, then the stone itself cannot be said to have will; thus neither can it be said that in the nature of a stone is a tendency to move toward the center of earth.

Yet bodies can mutate, adapt, evolve— isn't this a kind of will? Bodies act independently all the time: we walk in our sleep, we speak in tongues, we wake wet, we wake erect, we wake up with child, we wake up nameless amnesiacs, we find our insides have grown out of their casings, ballooned into tumors, and swallowed neighboring cells and nodes.

A cancer cell is a willful zealot, frenzied with positive energy, bent on spreading the good word of multiplicity. In groups, these cells plow

through crowds of other cells in search of never-ending life. They colonize whole swaths of tissue. The metastatic body is their manifest destiny.

A nurse wipes my hand with an antiseptic towelette, and I let the sting of the alcoholic smell fill my head. He jabs my left hand with an IV needle repeatedly as the vein wiggles side to side, escaping him. Finally, the needle slides in. The pre-op room widens. The white walls fall down like cardboard on a movie set. I begin to ask delirious questions about what kind of pants I'm wearing. My mother tells me I'm not wearing any, which seems preposterous. I tell her I'm twenty-two, which is true.

By the time I'm wheeled into the operating room, my senses are floating away. Sight goes quickly: the walls are sucked into a bright white hole in the ceiling. I can hear, but I can't move or speak, so when a man pulls my left hand to the side of the gurney, ties something smooth around it, and asks, "You don't still do this, do you?" I know he is referring to the scars on my arm, but I can't answer. My last thought before I go out is a kind of laugh: *strap me to the rack*. When I wake, my throat has been slit, my thyroid gland taken, my hand left black and blue. I am to understand this violence as a kind of grace, a rescue.

Grace and violence were always intertwined for Teresa: "spiritual sweetness does not enlarge the heart," she wrote, but rather "it seems to oppress it somewhat. . .if I began to weep over the Passion, I could not stop until I had a splitting headache; and the same thing happened when I wept for my sins. This was a great grace granted to me by our Lord." Grace was not received in response to her pain, but rather, her pain was a consequence of increased grace. Still she longed for it.

The masochistic body wears its desire like a thorned crown, a spiked collar, a wiry cilice.

Rough shirts made of animal hair or burlap, *cilices* can be worn in

repentance. The rough texture creates tiny abrasions on the torso that build and fester. Its constant dull irritation of the skin, though less dramatic than self-flagellation or religious scarring and piercing rituals, is nonetheless a reminder of one's fleshly limitations, "for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live."

To deny oneself bodily pleasures through fasting and abstinence is a means of preventing distractions from spiritual matters, but the need to wade into mortification suggests a different goal—something closer to punishment, but with an emphasis on disfigurement. The marks these rituals leave on the body—furrows of scar tissue striating the back, openings bored into ears and lips, channels of blue ink carved into the arms and neck—point toward a transformation of the soul. Perhaps, through these physical cracks, some trace of self can be located, extricated, felt, seen, and smelled: pus, sweat, blood.

A tattoo: skin sloughed off, skin filled in. When the ink enters, the body understands it as an invasion, so it sends white blood cells in hordes—microphages, the cells tasked with cleaning up messes. They swallow debris left from dead cells, cancer cells, and foreign substances. In the case of a tattoo, they soak up the ink and try in vain to break it down, remaining suspended at the site of entry in perpetuity—a lifelong infection. In this way, the tattoo is an unending test of the body's immune system, its slowly fading color a testament of the body's will to heal.

I'd chosen a spiral. My book of symbols described it as invocation of "potential power" in some Buddhist traditions, so I planned to have it tattooed on the underside of my right wrist. I wanted a reminder of what my right hand could do: draw, paint, sculpt. At eighteen, I could produce a likeness of the world from a glob of paint and find shapes waiting within a chunk of clay. I could hold a knife in that hand and decide whether or not I would bleed on any given day. A little pack of straight razors used for cutting my arm sat in my desk drawer beside

charcoal sticks, graphite pens, India Ink and metal nibs.

The pain of this tattoo was crisp—the fill-in work was a series of delicate bites, then sparrow beaks pecking at me. It was nothing like the dull pressure of an upper arm tattoo or the pointed sting of the one on my upper back. This one was much smaller than the others—only a curved line of about two inches, maybe an eighth of an inch of fill-in. The whole process was so brief that I felt vaguely disappointed when the artist said, “All done.”

The image turned out to be roughly a logarithmical spiral, defined by the fact that each curve of the spiral geometrically mirrors the next, allowing the spiral to expand without losing its shape. Known as a ‘self-similar’ object, the shape of the whole is the same as any one of its parts: the Golden Ratio. Logarithmical spiral patterns are common in the natural world: spider webs, hurricanes, corneas, nautilus shells, goat horns, the Milky Way, the human cochlea. Following this spiral pattern, a hawk will descend upon its prey in the same way that a moth will travel toward a beaming light. Descartes used this shape—its perfection in equiangularity—in one of his arguments for the existence of God. I didn’t know any of this when I got the tattoo; I only wanted to mark myself with some sign of will—if not action, then at least a projected path.

Teresa’s soul, she said, was comprised of seven mansions. In prayer, she forged a path through these mansions one at a time, ultimately reaching a space in which she could receive spiritual gifts directly from God. Implicit in this state of union then is openness—in reception, offerings must be met with an outstretched palm, cradled arms, outspread legs, a dropped jaw. In this way, the dependence of grace upon pain makes sense—one can assume that the soul is no more easily opened than skin.

Our nervous systems do not allow us to re-feel pain through memory, but we have many ways of describing it: burning, aching, splintering,

throbbing, pounding, crushing, numbing, shooting, piercing, stabbing, sharp, dull, tender, sore. Yet sometimes pain has no quality to be recalled. It is a negative sensation. It consumes the senses until the self ceases to know it exists.

Sometimes Teresa ceased to exist almost entirely. Her mysticism was a means of physiological non-being, in which the mind is “so dumbfounded that, even if any consciousness remains to it, neither hands nor feet can move...it might be taken for dead.” She was nerveless, weightless, a body in the space of itself without gravity. It was an “enrapturing of the senses and faculties” that allowed her to temporarily free herself from her body in order to commune with God. “I feel no pain,” she wrote, “until the suspension is over.” Prayer as anesthetic.

When I wake from surgery, there is no room holding me. There is no bed, no blanket, no bandage on my neck. I have no neck, no flesh left. There is only pain in the way that there is only black before your eyes adjust to a dark closet. My mind blinks like an eyeball trying to right its vision, but nothing adjusts. No shapes fall into place, so I’m unable to define spaces, to separate myself from the pain, the pain from anything. *The pain is me*, I think, and suddenly I have being. *Cogito ergo sum*.

Emerging from a distant point within the world-space of this pain is a sound like a stone being dragged across pavement—a calcified growl. When a woman’s face appears above me, I see a ceiling behind her. My mind orients itself as *down*, and my body lifts *up* as if of its own will. I will reach this nurse, and she will give my pain a shape I can hold, crush, and swallow. “You’ll hyperventilate,” she says. “Stay down, and breathe slowly. Stop wheezing.” The growl is coming from my body. She leaves, then returns with an oxygen mask and a needle. The pain breaks apart in minutes, and I feel it settle like drops of water into my skin. *Sentio ergo sum*.

Is this how some sense of a soul enters? A slice, a light, a little psychic

slip.

Two centuries before Teresa's ecstasies, Thomas Aquinas described the soul as an integral and subsistent part of the physical body. The soul, he said, is able to exist, move, and act as its own "particular thing" in the body, even as it also carries out the intentions of a larger whole—the human being. In this way, the soul "thinking" is much like a finger pointing, a hand closing, or a wrist flicking.

Yet Teresa's pain was not wholly bodily. "The soul," she wrote, "is suffering so keenly within that it takes no notice of the body. It is as when we have a very acute pain in one spot; we may have many other pains, but we feel them less...the soul feels nothing at all, and I do not believe it would feel anything if it were cut into little pieces."

In some ways, the cutting was as practical as surgery: I opened myself to get something out—some phantom cancer: guilt or longing. It made no difference in how I felt, of course, which only gave me another reason to do it: I wanted to prove my body wrong in its clean boundaries, to prove that I wasn't inside my body—my body was me.

Other times, I was ecstatic. Oh, the knife. It had to be hot, at first. I used a candle, relishing the theatrics. The heat changed the quality of the pain from something dull and rough to a clean, sharp sear. The sting of that initial incision then made the rest easier—its intensity a form of numbing. Concentrating on the knife as my skin folded up around it, I experienced mild tunnel vision. I was aware of a certain few objects around me, but the landscape as a whole receded.

When I carried out the ritual on our back porch, the neighbor's roses in the next yard would float before me, suspended in my peripheral vision. Birdcalls stretched and dipped like a warped record playing from somewhere behind my head. The pain was just a bath I sat in, a temperature my body grew accustomed to in a matter of minutes. I only knew I was done with the knife when the pain came back. I

wrapped my arm in paper towels, rolled down my sleeve, and carried on as normal, perhaps making myself a snack in the kitchen.

To be blessed is to be bloodied. In English, there is an etymological connection between the words ‘blessing’ and ‘blood,’ which share a root in the Old English *blōd*. This seems natural given the religious ritual of sacrifice and even the process of transubstantiation: when holy wine is blessed, it becomes blood. When we drink, it enters our blood; it bloodies us.

The masochistic body is a mystical body in its radical physicality. Its logic is circular. Its logic is a wound opened repeatedly. It insists on its own submission. It wills itself out of being.

Cutters, they’re called—it’s the act that names them. Watch: their eyes are open and closed. Their bodies are arched and hunched. They cry, they grimace, they smile, they stretch their lips into Os. They splay themselves on their floors or curl themselves into humps on their beds. The walls fold down around them, but their ceilings open up to a nothingness soft and blank as God. What are they reaching for? Release of tension, proof of feeling, cries for attention, emotional catharsis, physical manifestations of guilt: are these not comparable to the goals of penitents and mystics? Implied in the act of cutting—in its pursuit of blood and scars—is a concern with the boundary between inner and outer life, between physical and spiritual states, between the self and the not-self.

To identify the self, one must identify the non-self physically: sweater, tree trunk, wine glass, egg, car key, centipede. If our means of making this distinction (that is, sensation) is altered or broken, how can we know where self starts or ends? And if we cannot think *self*, do we cease, in some small way, to exist? *Cogito ergo sum*. At some point in the digestive process (teeth? saliva? stomach? intestine? spleen?) a scrambled egg becomes self—and likewise, the self can become blood, become waste, become another kind of egg (or perhaps even a new

self). Is it absurd then to ask how much of the soul is soaked up by the tampon, how much flushed?

Recurrence like a dream: I was reopened. Seven of my lymph nodes removed and placed in a jar, little diamonds pried from their setting.

In disease, I find and remove little parts of me constantly: metastasis as self-knowledge. It was easiest to reopen me in the same place: self-knowledge as unhealing wound. The incision line in my neck widened slightly, and I noticed afterward how the corners turned up at the ends: a permanent smile. Eventually, it thickened and lifted from my neck in a glossy white ridge that mimicked the scars on my left arm.

Like the mystical body, the diseased body is unstable, fluid, volatile. It is an entrance, an exit, an entrance again.

Teresa suffered from physical illness throughout most of her life: chronic pain, fevers, insomnia, ulcers, vomiting, heart palpitations, fainting spells, and even partial paralysis. She was often confined to her bed at home and at the convent. In fever and in prayer, she was liable to transform like a shape-shifter. She could lift her body off like a veil and cover herself in swaths of sensation: “As I write this, the noises in my head are so loud that I am beginning to wonder what is going on in it... My head sounds just as if it were full of brimming rivers, and then as if all the water in those rivers came suddenly rushing downward; and a host of little birds seem to be whistling, not in the ears, but in the upper part of the head, where the higher part of the soul is said to be.”

My body loved morphine violently. Post-surgery, I was thrown into sinking spells of non-feeling before my stomach turned in on itself. Awake but numb, I stared at flecks of dust caught in sunlight, letting them settle on the blankets packed tightly around my legs. My legs. I'd forgotten about them, but there they were beneath the blanket in perfect shape—just like the rest of my body. I was only missing one thing: a gland I'd never seen—and only a sutured lip of skin was left in

its wake. How was I different?

When the nurse brought me red Jell-O and chicken broth in brown containers, I couldn't remember what hunger was, exactly, but I brought a spoon of broth to my mouth and swallowed anyway. Sickness rushed in. Somebody handed me a blue plastic dish shaped like a kidney and I vomited into it—the yellow broth swirling in a pool of saliva. After a while, I tried a tiny chunk of Jell-O, and again, my body spit it back: smaller red chunks in a puddle of clear, acidic liquid—the not-self washed in the self and flooded out. My body would receive nothing; it willed the world out of me. There in the blue dish was evidence of an immaculate absence inside, and I'd never felt so clean—or vulnerable. I was tiny, hollow, hardly more than a stick-person.

After the second surgery, they gave me a different drug that simply erased my body altogether. From the hospital bed, my mind became the fleck of dust, and it hovered on a current of air at the top of the room. Below, my family played cards and watched daytime talk shows. Light bounced off of them in rays as if they were tiny crystals. Every two hours throughout the day and night, a nurse shuffled in, gently waking me with a hand on my shoulder. Each time, her face was different, but the action was the same: she pushed a needle into my arm, retrieving a tube of blood, and then told me to go back to sleep before she left holding a little vial of me, now not-me. In their journey from heart to artery to needle to tube, at what point did those cells become not-me?

Under a microscope, some kinds of cell death look similar to star death. The cell contracts, pulsates, blooms into new shapes that float out from the center and into the vast space of the body. In *apoptosis*, a cell's membrane is damaged, opening up fault lines along which the cell can fracture. It may look flayed at first, before each extension breaks off in a slow explosion. In an exemplary display of the body's cold efficiency, the debris is carried away for future use in other cells. This is the same process by which the cells of our webbed prenatal flesh dissolve in the womb so that our fingers and toes can separate, eventually becoming

instruments of sensation and manipulation. When a star dies, it too expands and breaks apart. It forms a cloud of gas and light that will eventually diffuse into space, where other celestial bodies will suck them in, the now non-star subsumed. When it finds itself formless, it seems energy will simply travel to a new container.

Perhaps Teresa's union with God was *jouissance*, a pleasure so intense that it breaks the self apart—her desire for it was a driving toward death. Indeed, she described it as “a delectable death, a snatching of the soul from all the activities which it can perform while it is in the body; a death full of delight, for in order to come closer to God, the soul appears to have withdrawn so far from the body that I do not know if it has still life enough to be able to breathe.”

Treatment molds the diseased body into a masochist. It is taught to want what's frightening, painful, revolting, and frustrating: a needle, please; a scalpel to the throat; a toxic tonic; a quarantine.

In radioactive iodine treatment, the goal is to destroy scraps of thyroid tissue left clinging to the throat after surgery. Starved, suicidal, the thyroid cells will drink in the poison. I suck up my iodine through a bendable straw. When I'm done, the technician peers inside and tells me to finish the last drops. I slurp them loudly, licking my lips once they're gone.

The liquid and grit that my body expels over the week will be radioactive—a threat to any healthy thyroid gland. My urine and saliva are especially dangerous, since my bladder and salivary glands will absorb and filter out the excess iodine most quickly. I am to quarantine myself for at least three days. Outside of the hospital I feel heavy but powerful, as if I'm carrying some dangerous secret around inside my belly. I've ingested a private barrier—a wall between myself and others that only I can see.

The diseased body resists recovery. It discards its ease, disowns its

peace. It is guarded, troubled. It doesn't reveal itself lightly.

Blood tests: every three months. Ultrasound followed by fine-needle biopsy: every three months. Blood tests stimulated with TSH: every six months. Full-body scan with thyrogen injections and radioiodine dose: every twelve months. PET scans, CT Scans, and other measures: as needed. Three years. Four. Five. Time flows through IVs.

During the scan, I'm told to lie still for set amounts of time in various positions as a cylinder circled my body, narrowing around me like a cocoon. The machine itself gives me instructions for breathing. "Breathe in," it says, then "breathe out," then "stop breathing," in cycles as Simon & Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" plays from a speaker behind my head. Eventually, "I Am a Rock" begins, another one I recognize. If I move, I'd been told, the images produced will be faulty, so I shouldn't flinch, even when it seems as if the machine is closing in. Lying on my back beneath a white sheet now, I stare up at the taupe plastic arch of the machine as it descends in miniscule increments, stopping only when it's about an inch from my nose. I'm still as a stone as the machine peers into me and I sing to myself, *I am a rock, I am an island*.

Technicians search their screens for a light in my body, but they can't quite locate it. The image before them is dark, opaque, unwilling. It dares the doctors to open me again.

The diseased body is also maternal. It holds its pain as a mother holds an infant—selfishly, desperately. No pain is like my pain, the diseased body says, and in this way it loves its pain.

When I am shown the little titanium tag that will be placed in my breast during biopsy, I think of the filament inside a light bulb. A slender wire U, it sits in the center of a square plastic box like a piece of jewelry. In future mammograms, my breast will illumine on a screen and the dark outline of this wire will mark my tissue as previously explored—a flag. I think about how many tags I would need to mark every piece of my

body that's been medically penetrated in biopsy over the last seven years. I'd wear them like an internal necklace: four in my throat—plus one on my cervix.

In the exam room, the doctor comments on my tattoos—she likes the flowers along my left arm, how delicate they look. She holds up a contraption that resembles a caulking gun and shows me the attached needle she will be using. Almost as big as a drinking straw, it's hollow and cut sideways at the tip so that it can smoothly suck up whole chunks of me. The nurse offers me her hand to use as a brace above my head while the doctor shoves the needle into the side of my left breast. The tissue is dense, she says, so she has to push with both hands. On the first two attempts, her aim is off—a fumbling part of the biopsy process with which I have become familiar. I watch the screen on my right as the needle blindly probes clusters of white light, pushing them aside in search of a stone-like center. I decide to stop watching and close my eyes. I've been given local anesthetic, so my skin and surface tissue are numb, but the pressure turns my chest into a kind of bomb paused at the moment just before explosion. When the needle reaches the suspicious node it wants, the pain is like an egg cracking open.

For a week afterward, my breast is swollen, purple, and tender. In the shower, I cradle it and wash gently. Its soft weight in my hand feels like the head of an infant.

“It is a curious thing,” Teresa wrote, “here we are, meeting with hindrances and suffering from imperfections by the thousand, with our virtues so young that they have not yet learned how to walk—in fact, they have only just been born.” The searching self is always circular, is a womb, is a constant bodily beginning.

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