

Tomb and Temple :
The Poet's Use of Positive Body Imagery
To Communicate Messages of Psychological Wellbeing

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Thesis Proposal

Mary Oliver writes that imagery is the texture of a poem, and the “detailed, sensory language incorporating images . . . gives the poem dash and tenderness” (Oliver 92). Imagery brings poetry to life, offering the reader a whole-body experience over simple description. Oliver cautions, however, that imagery is powerful and should be used responsibly, further implying that this texture can also become jolting, harsh, or offensive if used incorrectly (Oliver 107-108). With this caution in mind, the purpose of my forty-six poem collection—*Tomb and Temple: Letters to the Body*—is to use images of the body responsibly, in a way that communicates messages of healing and mental wellbeing. As someone who previously held destructive views regarding the body, this creative work portrays new perspectives on the body that helped me in reaching a personal state of psychological wellbeing. Throughout the critical paper, I also explore how traditional and contemporary poets have used positive body imagery to communicate similar messages of psychological wellbeing. Thus, my proposed thesis title is “*Tomb and Temple: The Poet’s Use of Positive Body Imagery to Communicate Messages of Psychological Wellbeing.*” The following proposal not only will provide a more in-depth overview of my vision and motive for the creative project, but also will thoroughly survey past literature to display how positive body imagery within works of poetry have aided authors’ messages of mental health and wellbeing.

Artist Statement

Background

Impetus

The physical body played a prominent role in my childhood memories, an emphasis largely propagated by my mother. My mother worked as a chemical laboratory scientist for years and today is a self-acclaimed work-out enthusiast and *endorphin junkie*. From an early age, I shared my mother's fascination with the body: I watched in wonder as cuts on my knees crystallized into dark, ruby scabs and marveled at how varying exercise choices made my body build and grow differently. In adolescence—and with increased pressures and anxieties—this bodily obsession became an easy gateway to an eating disorder; and as I watched loved ones become ill or die in early adulthood, this interest and awareness turned into curiosity (at best) and hypochondria (at worst).

Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that in adulthood I am most fascinated by poems that feature images of the body. Particularly two poems, Ross Gay's "Ode to Buttoning and Unbuttoning My Shirt" and an excerpt from H.D.'s "The Walls Do Not Fall," sparked in interest in how body imagery was used in poetry. I was mesmerized when Gay writes that unbuttoning one's shirt every morning is a practice in delicately "sliding the bones home" (Gay, line 75). Inversely, I was disturbed by Doolittle's bodily reaction to the bombing of London in World War II: "Pressure on heart, lungs, the brain/ about to burst its brittle case/ (what the skull can endure!)" (Dove 67). I wished to discover why some body imagery produced a deep, visceral disgust, while other references produced feelings of rest and healing. I also knew that as a Christian writer, I had a duty to portray messages of light, hope, and healing regarding the body.

Process

Poetry is one of the most appropriate genre for the purpose of this creative and research project. First, poetry is the least startling or offensive genre in which to handle sensitive body topics. Many people are squeamish or uncomfortable with body conversations. Robert Rodger's, in his book *Metaphor: A Psychoanalytic View*, writes that "there may be no single source of poetic imagery with as much potential for disturbing the reader as the human body" (qtd. in Naydan 16). Furthermore, Christian readers are uniquely wary of the body, as it is often portrayed as material not spiritual, and sins against the body are deemed more severely by some (1 Corinthians 6:18). Genres such as nonfiction, memoir, and fiction present obstacles to the wary: nonfiction or memoir may re-open readers' wounds with its emphasis on realism, and fiction may still represent body topics too explicitly, acting as an enabler. Poetry allows for abstraction and therefore distance. Imagery and figurative language, when uses responsibly, can ease readers into darker topics like death, illness, and the body by comparing to softer, known concepts. The article "I Sing the Body Problematic: Terror, Trauma, and Contemporary Poetry" arrives at a similar conclusion: "Poetry, a facet of culture that relies on symbolic thinking to chart even the most aversive human experiences, offers unique grounds to examine cultural ideas and practices regarding the body and death" (Clauge 1). Therefore, poetry is an appropriate choice in genre for addressing newer, more positive ways of viewing the body.

Finally, poetry is again an appropriate genre for changing perspectives on the body for its reliance on the body over other writing styles. This fact is proved best by poetry's musicality. Poetry begs to be read aloud and memorized; it can even inspire dance. Poetry conjures a beat deep in the body, turning the human pulse into rhythm and blues. Poetry delights in the rolling-of-the-tongue over teeth as the reader explores *assonance* and *consonance*. In short, reading and

writing poetry is a bodily activity, more so than in other genres, and is therefore a smart choice in communicating messages on the body.

Literary Context

Positive Body Imagery & Strong Social Relationships

Height, width, hair, and facial features—these aspects of the body are inherited qualities one receives from his respective culture and family. Poets who wish to communicate messages of psychological wellbeing can use images of these inherited bodily features to further strengthen the relationship between cultural communities and families. Furthermore, in attempts to strengthen social bonds, attitudes of acceptance and empathy are vital. For example, Walt Whitman, in “I Sing the Body Electric,” uses the body to create empathy between a diverse group of readers (of differing genders and races). He further writes that “the armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them” (Whitman, line 1.2). In other words, Whitman argues that race-specific, bodily features are symbols of love that should be accepted; he also argues that while different in many aspects, all communities share the human body—a similarity which should produce empathy.

Marge Peircy’s work “My Mother’s Body” is another example of how the body can produce feelings of acceptance and empathy, attitudes that strengthen social relationships:

This coat has been handed down, an heirloom

this coat of black hair and ample flesh,

this coat of pale slightly ruddy skin.

This set of hips and thighs, these buttocks

they provided cushioning for my grandmother

Hannah, for my mother Bert and for me (Peircy, lines 3.7-12)

By studying the bodily similarities within her family, Piercy gains acceptance, empathy, and gratefulness for her family members. The subsequent sections will provide a more thorough survey of poets (like Komunyakaa and Clifton) who have used the body to display strong social relationships.

In *Tomb and Temple*, I also wish to draw closer to my own culture and family through a close study of my physical body. I wish to explore how my immediate nuclear family—those who share my genes, and therefore share my anatomy, mannerisms, and personality—and even my geography and culture are embedded in my own body. I wish to write about my mother and our shared physical appearance: our large eyes, our wide hips, and even our longer second-toe. I wish to write about my father and our shared behaviors, such as our bad posture. Overall, these poems will strive to communicate a spirit of acceptance. My collection will also briefly explore how my body is both similar and different to the bodies of those who lived in the past—family or otherwise. In all this, I aim to offer messages of acceptance and empathy: that the body is what connects cultures despite their differences, and that the body is a physical manifestation of love, culture, and family.

Positive Body Imagery & Meaning to Female Readers

Two perspectives that helped me the most in overcoming an eating disorder were viewing the body as a capable, functional entity and viewing the body as worthy in Christ. Many female readers struggle with perceptions of their ability and worth, especially regarding the body. Poets have seen this struggle as an opportunity to communicate messages of wellbeing—messages that reinforce female capability and self-worth. One poet who was an original inspiration for this thesis project was Emily Dickinson, who dove fearlessly into topics like botany and anatomy (with works like “The Brain—Is Wider than the Sky—” and “The Brain within Its Groove.”) Her

life and work exemplified the capable and smart woman; and Dickinson's few close friends regarded her highly for her mind, not appearance. With Dickinson in mind, I researched other female poets that used the body in their works to portray ability and confidence—two aspects that indicate a healthy sense of meaning. The subsequent sections will provide a more thorough survey of Maya Angelou's and Anne Sexton's work, and how their poems of the body portrayed the capable and worthy woman.

In this creative work, I aim to highlight what the body allows me to do as opposed to its aesthetic elements. In my own creative work, I wish to expound upon the established literary context, praising the body functions that allow me to engage in physical activities such as hiking, laughing, and simply breathing. I wish to reevaluate those more negative feelings and images: the bloated stomach, the too-tight jeans, the wide feet, and the body odor. I wish to praise the food (and the process of digestion) that gives me energy, the legs that allow for running, the feet that are the strong foundation to my ever-moving frame, and the smells that come from living. Overall, I seek to portray the female body as functional over aesthetic. I also wish to portray the body—with all its blemishes and inherent sin-nature—as worthy in the eyes of God.

Positive Body Imagery & Positivity and Accomplishment in Sickness

Poets can use positive body imagery to communicate messages of positivity and accomplishment, even within sickness. Many poets have displayed the sick, dysfunctional, or failing body. However, this imagery alone, while perhaps helpful for the writer to express, is largely disturbing for the reader and not healthful alone. For example, Sylvia Plath and the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva both had a lack of regard for the body, even admitting pleasure from the mutilation of the body. Plath's poem "Cut" shows the author's eagerness to destroy the body. Her attitude is not of mental or physical wellbeing:

What a thrill—
my thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of hinge
of skin (qtd. in Nayden 17).

While the reality of bodily failure may cause desensitization, disgust, or despair in writers, poets who wish to offer help or healing to their audience can choose to display the body positively—even through sickness. Poets wishing to communicate messages of wellbeing also should use the body as a way to communicate victory or control over sickness—a message that offers readers a sense of accomplishment. Anne Bradstreet is one poet, through intimate and confessional poetry, who used the body to promote positivity and to find accomplishment in sickness. Marianne Boruch too is a poet who lightens heavier topics of sickness and death through personifying the body (as seen in works like “Cadaver, Speak” and “The Body”). The subsequent sections will provide a more thorough survey of the poets mentioned (including a work from Dickinson) who have used the body to display positivity and accomplishment in illness.

In *Tomb and Temple*, I wish to discuss my own bodily struggles—anxiety, fear of aging, minor chronic ailments, and hypochondria—and how I have found positivity and victory throughout these physical sicknesses. I wish to take a confessional tone like Bradstreet; sometimes I desire to feel despair like Plath. However, my poetry will use negative body imagery to release negative emotion and ultimately gain positive emotion. I also wish for the recovered body to be a recurring theme throughout my works—an image of accomplishment and hope to readers.

Vision

Creative

This poetry collection will contain forty-six poems; additionally, the collection will be divided into three sections (which focus on the three new perspectives on the body): the body in relation to culture and family, the female body, and the sick but victorious body. Interspersed will be poems that depict struggle and doubt as I reach new conclusions and healthy perspectives on my physical body. The collection will be written mostly in free verse and will include both lyric and prose style poems. The prose poem offers particular promise in this project, as it abandons narrative for contemplation and inner transformation; and transformation of thought on the body is the objective of this project. I plan to make use of the list poem also, not only because it is a favorite poetic technique of mine, but also because it references back to those writers who first pioneered body imagery into poetry—particularly Walt Whitman.

Regarding subject matter, some poems may have the body feature as the explicit topic while other poems may only use the body as a central metaphor. Also, I wish for the theme of *struggle* to be evident amongst the work; in other words, I wish to show that these new perspectives take time to adopt. It is ultimately through this slow transformation that readers can find not just realism, but inspiration.

For the Reader

For the reader, I wish for this collection to be a form of healing and therapy from destructive, modern body experiences. These harmful philosophies include the following: that the body is a source of division, that the female body is only important for its aesthetics, and that the bodily mutilation or desensitization is an appropriate response to illness. There is evidence to suggest that creative arts therapy, such as poetic therapy, does have healing qualities. “Using

Creative Arts in Trauma Therapy: The Neuroscience of Healing” says that the emotion-memory connection related to a traumatic experiences can be re-written when clients are asked to perform creative activities (like dancing and writing) that engage both hemispheres of the brain; the right side of the brain, when activated, helps in emotional retrieval, and the left hemisphere, when engaged, helps in putting that emotion into a narrative (Perryman, Blisard, and Moss 87). Poetry may, in fact, have heightened healing qualities as it includes aspects that are recognized by both the left and right hemispheres of the brain—good poetry includes both music and sound, but also structure and narration.

Significance

For Poetry

This collection is significant for the genre because my works will not only mix the confessional nature of Sexton’s and Plath’s work, but also will emulate the positivity of Bradstreet, Clifton, and Angelou. In other words, many confessional poems stem from a place of hopelessness or discontent—my work will strive to be honest but hopeful. This hope is derived from my Christian faith, a fact which will also inform my poetic choices uniquely. Therefore, while body conversations might not be foreign to the genre, I wish to present a tone and perspective that is unique: one that is gut-wrenchingly direct but also encouraging and positive.

This collection is also significant in that it aims to close the gap between science and art. Creation in art and discovery in science require many of the same questioning, evaluating, and testing abilities. The two fields provide for one another an endless source of inspiration, and my collection will attempt to blend the fields seamlessly. This collection will show how body symbolism and imagery can extend the reach of poetic metaphor, and by extension, the reach of the readers’ perspective.

For the Christian

There is special significance of this collection to the Christian reader and scholar. Within the church, the body is seen as either a temptation to sexual sin or the primary adversary warring against spirit (inspired by verses that mention *the flesh*, such as Galatians 5:17). This collection will have significance for the Christian scholar in that it will encourage the view of a grace-filled and redeemed physical body—not a body that signifies our previously perverse sin nature. Especially during and after Jesus’ ministry, there are many positive references to the body in the Bible (such as Romans 12, a passage which claims that the church and its members mirror a physical body). While there are certainly body topics that call for caution, this collection will show church leaders and members alike that the body is a natural part of the human existence—an aspect that, when handled and discussed responsibly, can bring much healing.

Critical Paper

Poetry is different than other writing genres, like fiction or non-fiction, in that it deals more heavily with language, word play, abstraction, and imagery. Imagery particularly is one of the poet's most powerful tools of communication—so much so, that imagery even can alter a reader's physiological state. Kosslyn, Ganis, and Thomson, Harvard neuroscientists, claim that “90 percent of the brain regions used for imagining seeing something are the same ones used when actually seeing—true for the other senses also” (qtd. in Shewell 146). If real-world stimuli, for example, can produce feelings of anxiety or calm, then poetic imagery can affect similar physiological results. This lesson is especially pertinent regarding body imagery, an inherently sensitive source material. Poets can use positive body imagery to communicate messages of wellbeing to their audience—messages on building strong social relationships, on finding a healthy sense of meaning, and on gaining positivity and accomplishment through sickness.

Positive Body Imagery & Strong Social Relationships

Introduction

Strong social relationships are indicative of one's psychological wellbeing. Healthy social relationships begin through an acceptance of one's chosen and non-chosen communities and continue through practices in empathy. Furthermore, poets have successfully used positive body imagery in their works to reinforce these two aspects of strong social connection and therefore communicate deeper messages of wellbeing to readers.

Academic and Psychological Studies

Academic literature supports the idea that one's relationships with others is a primary indicator of wellbeing and happiness; conversely, isolation (or weak social bonds within chosen or non-chosen communities) is linked to mental distress. For example, J. A. Hicks and L.A.

King, in an article for *Cognition and Emotion*, found that “individuals with strong social bonds (i.e., those low on loneliness) judged their meaning in life to be high regardless of mood induction condition. . . . Social relationships are clearly an important contributor to meaning in life” (qtd. in Croom 28). Therefore, poets who wish to communicate messages of wellbeing would do well to start by providing examples of strong social relationships.

First, identification and acceptance of one’s community is an important preliminary step in strengthening one’s social bonds. A study from *the Journal of Happiness Studies* agrees that group identification plays a large part in well-being and that “a positive relationship [exists] between the number of groups with which participants identified and their SWL [satisfaction with life]” (Wakefield et al. 785). Groups include non-chosen (family and environmental) and chosen, voluntary groups (such as schools clubs and religious communities). Therefore, this recognition and acceptance of one’s current social groups is the first step in strengthening social bonds (and wellbeing grows exponentially when one expands his community). Positive body imagery in poetry has proven to be helpful for poets wishing to communicate such messages of cultural or familial acceptance.

Subsequently, empathy is an important quality of strong social relationships that prevents or even heals fractured social connections. Many studies have proven that increased empathy, the ability to understand “human suffering, and deliberate effort to understand, communicate, take up and act from others’ perspectives,” has led to increased social bonds (qt. in McNaughton 502-503). More specifically, heightened empathy for others, according to Susan Maree McNaughton, can benefit interpersonal and professional relationships (McNaughton 501). The body plays a unique role in forming empathetic bridges between people and groups. For example, McNaughton found in her study “Developing Pre-requisites for Empathy: Increasing Awareness

of Self, the Body and the Perspectives of Others” that when thirty-two participants were asked to engage in healthy body behavior and report their physiological response (a 12-week study), this bodily self-awareness developed into better understanding of others. McNaughton writes that “by applying self- and bodily awareness to others, participants have been able to imagine others’ perspectives and how imposed lifestyle changes [healthy ones] might impact on them” (McNaughton 510). In other words, participants who become more aware of their own body were able to imagine their physiological struggles (sluggishness from changes in diet, for example) in someone with a similar body—therefore, body awareness was a bridge to better empathy. It is clear that poets may find positive body imagery a valuable resource—a poetic technique that can further messages of empathy and, by extension, wellbeing.

Literary Application

First, poets have used positive body imagery to communicate messages of acceptance towards their cultural community. While it can be argued that equally as many poets have explored the idea of dissatisfaction or even bitterness with their body as a symbol of their cultural heritage, it is the poems of celebration and acceptance that provide examples of strong social relationships. First, this type of acceptance and positivity towards one’s cultural body is seen in Yusef Komunyakaa’s work “Anodyne.” Born in Louisiana in 1947, Komunyakaa describes how his body is intricately tied to his cultural community, and he does so with complementary terms:

I love it clear down to the soft
 quick motor of each breath. . . .
 this spleen floating
 like a compass needle inside

nighttime, always divining

West Africa's dusty horizon (Komunyakaa, lines 31-39).

The specific comparison to a compass needle is crucial—compass needles are pulled north magnetically; therefore, Komunyakaa, by connecting the spleen and compass needle, seems to portray an attitude of surrender, accepting that his body will always point to his culture. Further, Angela M. Salas, in an article for John Hopkins University Press, writes that Komunyakaa's work "has neither despaired nor denied his heritage" (Salas 34). And here, the compass has a double meaning: because Komunyakaa accepts his heritage, he symbolically finds direction, grounding, and strength within his community.

Komunyakaa also uses body imagery to communicate acceptance of his local community. He identifies with his regional, Louisiana heritage, connecting local music again to his own body: "I love this body, this / solo & ragtime jubilee / behind the left nipple" (Komunyakaa, lines 43-45). Though Komunyakaa's body was still a source of controversy in the deeply segregated South, he accepts the local culture as an intimate part of himself (intimacy conveyed by the left nipple, which further connotes the heart). Therefore, Komunyakaa's acceptance of his beautiful but crooked body in "Anodyne" is a symbol of his greater acceptance of his culture's history—the good and the ugly. Salas even postulates that this acceptance is what allows Komunyakaa to later show remarkable empathy and understanding for others, even those outside his community:

While drawing strength from the particularity of his experience as an African American southerner, and as a veteran of the American war in Vietnam, Komunyakaa nonetheless insists that he can function imaginatively from many different positions, not all of which derive from autobiography. In his career, Komunyakaa has taken on the personae of a

female Vietnamese rape victim, of tricksters, of a white member of a lynch mob, of combat veterans, and of his remembered childhood self (Salas 36).

In other words, Salas concludes that Komunyakaa is a powerful poet because he has accepted his own cultural community, and that strengthened bond gives him the foundation to feel empathy for other communities (further affirming that acceptance is a preliminary step, and empathy a subsequent one, in strengthening social bonds). Therefore, Komunyakaa's use of body imagery helps him communicate acceptance towards his cultural community, an acceptance that strengthens his social relationships.

Lucille Clifton is another poet who communicates messages of acceptance with body imagery—imagery that is highly celebratory. In “Homage to My Hips,” for example, Clifton's hips and more curvaceous body help tie the author to her female family members and women within the black community:

these hips

are free hips.

they don't like to be held back.

these hips have never been enslaved (Clifton, lines 5-8).

Here, Clifton is triumphant about her bigger hips, hips that “don't fit into little / pretty places” (Clifton, lines 4-5). Here, *little* is a subtle reference to white standards of beauty (which typically value thinness). Therefore, by embracing big and free hips, Clifton is making a pointed effort to unify black women, help them accept their own unique beauty, and strengthen their bond as a community. Strengthened community and acceptance are also her aims in “My Dream about Being White.” Here, she rejects the white body, which has “no lips, / no behind,” instead embracing her black body (Clifton, lines 8-9). While these poems may appear more to be

commentaries on body positivity, Clifton's true purpose was to offer solid grounding and community to her readers. In an article for *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Scarlett Cunningham agrees that Clifton's work is not a discussion on fatness versus thinness, but rather community: "Instead of focusing on a universal fat body, throughout her poetry she emphasizes that her mother and her female ancestors were large women like she is, with racially specific features, and she describes them as beautiful" (Cunningham 37). Therefore, Clifton, like Komunyakaa, uses positive body imagery in her works to communicate messages of acceptance and happiness for one's own cultural community. This acceptance strengthens social relationships.

Poets also use positive body imagery to communicate messages of empathy—a key indicator of strong social relationships. A prominent poet to this discussion, who famously bridged national divides through body imagery, was Walt Whitman with his 164-line poem "I Sing the Body Electric." With the categorization of a scientist, Whitman concludes that black and white bodies are of equal importance and value. He pleads with the reader to see human commonalities, not differences:

Have you ever loved the body of a woman?

Have you ever loved the body of a man?

Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?"

If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred (Whitman, lines 21-24).

Also, Whitman uses blood, and by extension the heart, as a literal and emotional symbol of unification with all nations: "Within there runs blood / The same old blood! the same red-running blood! / There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, desires, reachings, aspiration"

(Whitman, lines 7.109-111). Therefore, by discussing the similarities between genders and cultures, Whitman is able to produce an empathetic piece that stirs appreciation for others in the hearts of readers. This empathy and understanding leads to stronger social relationships with those in differing communities.

Generational differences often provide opportunity for superiority or divisiveness, but positive body imagery again can be used by poets to communicate empathy. Imagery that specifically features bodily similarity and connectedness between family members will help display these types of empathetic relationships. Marge Piercy's "My Mother's Body" (where the narrator shares an antagonistic relationship with her mother) and Clifton's "The Thirty-Eight Year" (where the narrator's relationship is more positive) are two examples of how authors can use body imagery to find better understanding within the mother-daughter relationship.

In "My Mother's Body," Piercy displays the often incompatible, complex relationship that she shared with her mother. The two often fought over appropriate dress and fashion, as Piercy wore her hair long, and her mother's hair was cropped in flapper fashion. Her mother's insistence hardened the Piercy's own will:

You pushed and you pulled on my rubbery
 flesh, you kneaded me like a ball of dough.
 Rise, rise, and then you pounded me flat.
 Secretly the bones formed in the bread.

I became willful (Piercy, lines 4.9-13)

Here, body imagery is used negatively, and the reader feels the mother's criticism *push*, *pull*, and *pound* against the narrator's figurative flesh. By extension the reader feels these blows, particularly because of the sensitive nature of body imagery. Despite this conflict, Piercy seeks

reconciliation and understanding with her mother. This journey begins with an acceptance of their similarities, a technique seen in Whitman's work. As Piercy's empathy grows, the body imagery becomes more positive. First, Piercy admits that she shares an unexplainable, supernatural connection to her mother—so strong, that when her mother dies, Peircy feels the affect physically:

Then hawkfaced pain seized you
 threw you so you fell with a sharp
 cry. . . .
 yet fifteen hundred miles north
 I heard and dropped a dish.

Your pain sunk talons in my skull (Piercy, lines 1. 6-8, 10-13).

Though these representations of the body are still predominantly negative (signifying pain), there is a neutral admission here—there is no commentary on this force or connection that binds them. Simply, when her mother feels pain, Piercy feels pain as well. Further, Peircy admits that she physically resembles her mother: “This coat has been handed down, an heirloom / this coat of black hair and ample flesh, / this coat of pale slightly ruddy skin” (Piercy, lines 3.7-9). While Piercy describes her inherited body, she refrains from adding personal opinion to the description. This absence seems to display her efforts in empathy, and her neutral (not entirely negative) tone shows a willingness to see things from her mother's perspective.

Ultimately, this focus on bodily similarities leads Piercy to empathy—the empathy that strengthens her and her mother's social bond. Piercy ends the poem with more understanding language: “This body is your body, ashes now /and roses, but alive in my eyes” (Piercy, lines 4. 4.29-30). The juxtaposition of *ashes* and *roses* indicates that while Piercy may always disagree

with her mother's philosophy, she is able to see her mother's beauty and purpose (and will carry that beauty on). Piercy's own words, in an interview for *The Kenyon Review*, reflect this strengthened relationship: "She [Piercy's mother] had an endurance, strength, and a richness that the society never respected, never acknowledged, but which was something very beautiful. I want to celebrate all that, because it was so put down when my mother was alive" (Rodden and Piercy 136). Therefore, body imagery and a focus on body similarities were key in helping Piercy arrive at empathy for her mother; additionally, an increasingly stronger bond with her mother was matched by increasingly positive body imagery. These final positive images of the body can also offer readers examples of healthy, social relationships.

Clifton, unlike Piercy, has already reached an empathetic state towards her mother in "The Thirty-Eight Year." This empathy leads Clifton to appreciate and praise the hard work of her mother, and positive body imagery reinforces the idea of their strong relationship:

i have wrapped me
 in your skin
 and made you live again
 more than once.
 I have taken the bones you hardened
 and built daughters
 and they blossom and promise fruit
 like Afrikan trees. (Clifton, lines 28-35).

Here, Clifton has reached such an empathetic state with her mother, that the two figuratively share the same bones and skin. This connection is strong enough to sustain Clifton, even when her mother has passed. Cunningham agrees that "Clifton compares herself to her mother in her

poetry in order to see if she is progressing appropriately through life and to keep her relationship with her mother alive” (Cunningham 37). Even the repeated *b* sound (in *bones*, *built*, and *blossom*) create a sense of connectedness and rootedness—symbolizing that Clifton finds footing in her life, thanks to her mother’s first work. Therefore, positive body imagery is a direct indicator of the author’s close, intimate relationship with her mother. This example can encourage readers to evaluate their own relationships, and language of the body can be intuitive in measuring feelings of closeness or distance in their own respective relationships.

Conclusion

Both psychological literature and poetic references prove that authors can successfully use positive body imagery to portray acceptance of one’s community and empathy outside one’s community. By communicating these two qualities, authors are ultimately communicating messages of psychological wellbeing. Finally, as seen in the previous works, increasingly positive language regarding the body indicates equally healthy social relationships.

Positive Body Imagery & Meaning for Female Readers

Introduction

An increased sense of meaning can lead to psychological wellbeing. Meaning is largely characterized by one’s perceived efficacy and self-worth. Furthermore, poets have successfully used positive body imagery in their works to reinforce these two beliefs and therefore communicate deeper messages of meaning and wellbeing to readers, particularly female readers.

Academic and Psychological Studies

Academic and psychological literature supports the idea that a strong sense of meaning is an indicator of psychological wellbeing. A.W. Crescioni and R. Baumeister found that those with a healthy sense of meaning were able to construct their life experiences into a story; these stories

typically contained four qualities: a statement of purpose, a system of values and justification, feelings of efficacy, and positive self-worth (qtd. in Croom 31). Therefore, authors who communicate messages of efficacy (or belief in one's ability) and bodily self-worth to female readers are by extension communicating healthful messages of meaning.

The need for these types of messages is urgent. Typically, women have lower belief in their own efficacy, though often they are just as competent in their respective fields as men. For example, David Dunning, a Cornell psychologist, and Joyce Ehrlinger, a Washington State University psychologist, asked male and female college students to answer questions on the scientific method, along with answering questions that measured the students' perceived competence or ability in science. They found that

the women rated themselves more negatively than the men did on scientific ability: on a scale of 1 to 10, the women gave themselves a 6.5 on average, and the men gave themselves a 7.6. When it came to assessing how well they answered the questions, the women thought they got 5.8 out of 10 questions right; men, 7.1. And how did they actually perform? Their average was almost the same—women got 7.5 out of 10 right and men 7.9 (Kay and Shipman).

In other words, while displaying equal efficacy with their male counterparts, women believed in their own abilities far less. If body imagery can help the poet better communicate female capability, then this gap in perceived ability may also close.

Self-worth, also defined as the respect or esteem one holds for herself, is similarly lower in women than in men. This gap is especially prevalent in the way women regard their body and appearance. In an article for the *Journal of College Student Development*, Sarah E. Lowrey et al. writes, "Even when both men and women were consistent exercisers, the women had poorer

body image” (Lowrey 612). However, there may be biological basis for this low self-esteem and confidence. Claire Shipman and Katty Kay, in an article for the *Atlantic*, found scientific backing for the well-observed disparity in confidence between men and women: “Studies using fMRI scans have found that women tend to activate their amygdalae more easily in response to negative emotional stimuli than men do—suggesting that women are more likely than men to form strong emotional memories of negative events. . . . women are more apt to ruminate over what’s gone wrong in the past” (Shipman and Kay). The authors also found that the anterior cingulate cortex, often called the worrywart center of the brain, is larger in women (Shipman and Kay). It is little wonder, then, that women—especially when endlessly bombarded with images of the ideal woman in Hollywood and the culture—take these representations more seriously and find themselves with low self-worth in comparison.

Fortunately, belief of efficacy and bodily self-worth are qualities women can attain, and poets who have employed positive body imagery have successfully communicated these qualities to their readers. For example, the reading of poetry in therapy (if the samples represent the body positively) has proven successful in building meaning. In “Anorexia Nervosa: A Synthesis of Poetic and Narrative Therapies in the Outpatient Treatment of Young Adult Women,” Joy M. Robbins & Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson reveal a case study between David Nylund and his client Amanda. The client underwent twelve therapeutic sessions in which she read body or eating-related poems. Poetic themes within these works started with secrecy and fear, ending with works that promoted bodily strength and ambivalence. Overall, Robbins and Pehrsson report that through reading positive body poems, Amanda internalized confidence: “She [Amanda] began discussing feelings of increased motivation to change, a stronger sense of self-efficacy, and a decreased desire to engage in self-starvation” (Robbins and Pehrsson 53). This study reveals that

poets who positively engage the body in their works do in fact communicate messages of efficacy and self-worth.

However, a focus on positive representation of the body—over a negative or realistic view of body disorders—is crucial. An additional study by Emily T. Troscianko, for the *Journal of Eating Disorders*, found that explicit eating-disorder works (such as novels, short stories, and poems) were “perceived as detrimental on dimensions central to the experience of an eating disorder (mood, self-esteem, feelings about one’s body, and diet and exercise habits) while other [types of] fiction is often perceived to have positive effects” (Troscianko 16). More simply, negative body portrayal did not increase self-esteem or feelings efficacy, while neutral or positive body representations communicated wellbeing or produced improvement.

Literary Application

Many poets, particularly female ones, have used positive body imagery to communicate messages of efficacy and self-worth. Two poets who communicate these messages of ability (over aesthetic) and heightened self-worth are Maya Angelou and Anne Sexton. Their works are not reductionist or extremist—Angelou and Sexton humanize themselves through acknowledging their appearance and conveying their struggle with comparison. However, their works are not ruled by these negative images; rather, these poets use positive body imagery to communicate messages of wellbeing.

First, Angelou, in “Phenomenal Woman” rejects the notion that aesthetics alone make a woman attractive, a philosophy which correlates with healthy efficacy and self-worth. Instead, the author portrays women as a caring, confident, and able people; these qualities, according to Angelou, are where the female magic lies. Ability is portrayed through the power and movement

of the work—not only in the explicitly mentioned power and movement of Angelou’s limbs (an example of positive body imagery), but also through the subtext and structure of the work:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.

I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size. . . .

It’s in the reach of my arms,

The span of my hips,

The stride of my step,

The curl of my lips.

I’m a woman

Phenomenally (Angelou, lines 1-2, 6-11)

Angelou shows these body parts in movement (such as lips meant for smiling). Further, lines like “It’s the fire in my eyes, / And the flash of my teeth” do not compare body parts to things typically-considered beautiful (like flowers) but rather to forces of nature with their implied movement and strength (Angelou, lines 22-23). Even the structure of the work is more focused on movement and rhythm than beauty, as each stanza itself becomes narrower with each line, pushing the reader’s eye downward and creating speed. Angelou continues, communicating that woman are competent and able because of their traditional role as nurturers. She writes a woman’s power is in “the palm of my hand, / The need for my care. / ’Cause I’m a woman” (Angelou, lines 55-57). *Palm* and *care* seem to indicate the sustaining aspects of womanhood: an ability, not an aesthetic, of the gender. This idea is solidified by Ashika Prajnya Paramita, who sees Angelou’s reference to arms as a symbols of “embrace and shield. An embrace connotes affection, friendship and tenderness. On the other hand, a shield indicates protection and shelter. From those two different connotations of the word ‘arms’, it can be concluded that in the arms of

a woman is a comfortable place offering affection, tenderness, and safety—it can embrace, yet protect at the same time” (Paramita 13). Therefore, Angelou communicates messages of efficacy to woman through the use of positive body imagery.

Angelou also uses positive body imagery to communicate messages of self-worth. In poetry, where description and observation of detail are typical, it is telling that Angelou does not describe the previously mentioned lips, legs, or hips. Though the work references this phenomenal woman’s attractive breasts, waist, and style, these references too lack description. Angelou’s handling of the female body seemingly implies that while appearance may be part of a woman’s charm, her ability is equally important. Furthermore, “Phenomenal Woman” is one of the works used in Nylund’s landmark study with Amanda that best communicated messages of empowerment and acceptance of the body (Robbins and Pehrsson 52). Therefore, Maya Angelou is an author who uses positive body imagery to successfully communicate messages of efficacy and self-worth to readers.

Many of Anne Sexton’s works convey a message that women are both able and worthy. These messages do not necessarily reflect the whole of Sexton’s work; in fact, Alicia Ostriker, poet and professor at Rutgers University, writes that while Sexton is “preoccupied with the flesh, she swings between experiencing it as sacred and fertile and experiencing it as filthy and defiled” (Ostriker 11). However, “In Celebration of My Uterus” is one such work that shows Sexton’s attempt to communicate messages of wellbeing—even if she struggled herself with those same truths and messages. It is clear through lines such as “For this thing the body needs / let me sing” and the thrice repeated phrase *if that is my part* that Sexton feels a certain weight of duty—a responsibility to share a message with her female audience (Dove 291).

First, “In Celebration of My Uterus” uses positive body imagery to communicate messages of female efficacy. Sexton displays women as creative, hard-working, and able—she is particularly triumphant in woman’s reproductive capabilities. Much of her commentary builds off Whitman’s previous works; in fact, Whitman, according to an article in *Woman’s Studies*, is considered by many as the precursor to feminist confessional literature that celebrated the body: “Whitman is especially laudatory of women’s reproductive capabilities: the womb as ‘national cradle’ is a reoccurring image throughout the poem” (Tunc 116). Sexton builds on this praise and offers readers a picture of the fruitful female body—a body that is the bearer of life, not an object for sexualization. To Sexton, reproduction is a purposeful, fulfilling role that cannot be contained:

Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.

Fasten, cover. Cover that does not contain.

Hello to the soil of the fields.

Welcome, roots (Dove 290).

Here, Sexton uses subtle but positive body imagery, comparing the uterus to an overflowing cup that cannot be contained. Sexton’s portrayal of the body, spilling and spreading roots, allows women to see the potential in their bodies and to imagine their purposefulness (as opposed to their appearance). This idea of women’s potential is also woven into the poem’s technique, and Tanfer Tunc suggests in “Rivers of the Body” that the alliterated *s* in “‘singing,’ ‘school girl,’ ‘sweet,’ ‘celebration,’ ‘soul,’ ‘central,’ ‘spirit,’ and ‘soil’ makes it sound as if her uterus is preparing for flight” (Tunc 123). Here, flight connotes not only ability but freedom and possibility. Sexton believes women can achieve this figurative flight because they are able and competent.

Sexton continues to communicate messages of efficacy, display women's bodies in action. The third stanza uses the phrase *one is* (repeated twelve times) to describe different woman, in all parts of the world, who are valuable because their ability. Reproduction ties them together, but their separate abilities are deemed powerful as well: "One is tying the cord of a calf in Arizona, / one is straddling a cello in Russia, / one is shifting pots on the stove in Egypt" (Dove 290). Much like Angelou showing the body in movement, here Sexton shows the female body in action—doing chores, making music, and tending the home. Similar to Angelou, Sexton does not remember these woman by their looks or beauty (no physical descriptions are mentioned), but rather by their capability. Therefore, Sexton uses positive body imagery in her work to communicate messages on women's efficacy.

Sexton also uses positive images of the body to aid in her message of women's self-worth. Reproduction alone, she claims, is sufficient for women to feel worthy. She claims, "Each cell has a life. / There is enough here to please a nation. / It is enough that the populace own these goods" (Dove 290). The word *enough*—repeated twice—indicates rest and acceptance; it is a word that does not ask or require more of women. Likewise, the vignette of twelve women from around the world is finished with the line "one is / anywhere and some are everywhere and all / seem to be singing" (Dove 291). Therefore, Sexton decides to abandon comparison and instead celebrates the worthiness of all women, from all over the world. This confidence in her worth is no better summarized than in the opening stanza's lines: "They said you were immeasurably empty / but you are not" (Dove 290). Though referring to Sexton's recommended hysterectomy, this stanza uses the uterus and the body as a greater symbol of resistance against a culture that continually berates female self-worth. In this key line, Sexton symbolically stands up for her worth even in the face of criticism. Therefore, Sexton successfully communicates

messages of efficacy and self-worth to women, messages that are heavily aided through the use of positive body imagery.

Conclusion

Both psychological studies and poetic references show the ability of positive body imagery to further the poet's message of efficacy and self-worth (two qualities that indicate a healthy sense of meaning). These messages are most pertinent to a female audience and have the potential to address scientifically-proven gaps in women's confidence and perceived ability. Furthermore, poetic messages featuring such healthy levels of meaning can provide valuable examples of psychological wellbeing.

Positive Body Imagery & Positivity and Accomplishment in Sickness

Introduction

Expression of positive emotion and a motivation to accomplish are two factors indicative of psychological wellbeing. Positive emotions are often produced through a release of negative emotion; and healthy accomplishment is indicated by one's motivation towards a task, goal, or change (accomplishment differs from efficacy in that it entails some tangible reward or outcome). Works featuring sickness or bodily failure are often filled with negative body imagery alone and leave little room for positivity and accomplishment. However, poets have successfully used positive body imagery in their works to reinforce these two aspects of wellbeing—positivity and accomplishment—even in works of sickness and bodily failure.

Academic and Psychological Studies

Academic and psychological literature supports the idea that positive emotion and accomplishment are indicators of psychological wellbeing. First, positive emotion has proven a vital aspect of wellbeing and life satisfaction. Barbara L. Fredrickson in "Unpacking Positive

Emotions: Investigating the Seeds of Human Flourishing” writes that “pleasant affective states appear to be critical ingredients within the recipe for human flourishing” (Fredrickson 57). While Fredrickson does not downplay the validity of negative emotions, she also argues that moving to positive emotions will expand one’s range of possibility: “Negative emotions . . . narrow people’s behavioral urges toward specific actions that were often life-preserving in times of threat (e.g., fight, flight), [but] positive emotions widen the array of thoughts and actions that spring to mind (e.g., play, explore) which facilitates generativity and behavioral flexibility” (Fredrickson 57). Therefore, poets who focus on themes of sickness or bodily failure can use positive body imagery coupled with negative body imagery to better communicate messages of positivity (and ultimately wellbeing) to their readers.

The motivation to accomplish tasks and goals is also a proven indicator of wellbeing. A. Kaplan and L. M. Maehr found in an article for *Contemporary Educational Psychology* that “pursuing task goals [for students] was found to have a significant positive relationship with all indices of well-being, as well as with perceptions of academic efficacy and GPA” (qtd. in Croom 33). It is important to note that these students displayed wellbeing not only for reaching their certain goal but also in pursuing this task or goal. Furthermore, L. James, in “Achievement and the Meaningfulness of Life,” writes that “all other things being equal, a life with some achievements in it is more meaningful than one without any achievements” (qtd. in Croom 33). Poets can indicate this type of accomplishment through images of the body in recovery. Poets can also indicate accomplishment by presenting narrators who reach better a better understanding of their sickness or regain control over the body and sickness, both physical and mental. All these images convey message of wellbeing, more so than negative body imagery alone.

Finally, it has been shown through many studies that poems with strongest messages of wellbeing included a key transition: from negative emotion to positivity and feelings of accomplishment. These findings are especially relevant in works featuring sickness and bodily failure. For example, “Evaluating Poetry on COVID-19” by Jeroen Dera found that people have generally not responded well to COVID poetry: “That is, the most frequently mentioned line of argumentation is escapist in nature: The desire to escape from reality – one currently dominated by corona – is so profound that readers of poetry do not want to read poems on the topic” (Dera 88-89). Dera’s study also indicates that poetry reading, on the whole, increased during the worldwide pandemic. These two facts together—an increased attraction to poetry but a dislike of COVID poetry—may only indicate boredom with an increasingly cliché topic, but they perhaps also indicate the general reader’s desire to heal from pain (positivity) and have victory over current conditions (accomplishment). In “Lockdown Poetry, Healing and the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Rachid Acim writes that the most popular COVID-19 poets “consecrated all efforts to lessen burdens and alleviate suffering and trauma” while not discrediting suffering altogether (Acim 71). Here also, messages of positivity and accomplishment were clearly preferred messages. Even in poetic therapy (a form of creative arts therapy), sick and elderly clients have found the most wellbeing from releasing negative emotion and switching to positive attitudes or feelings of accomplishment. For example, Michelle Nicholson conducted a study with ten women—all of whom experienced chronic pregnancy illness. Within four sessions (which included writing on their bodily condition and conducting interviews), women were able not only to “to vent and externalize feelings in their writing” but also to “reclaiming control by writing about their pregnancy sickness” (Nicholson 247). Their responses indicate a shift from negativity to positivity and accomplishment regarding the sick body. While this study focuses on creative

arts therapy specifically, the implications towards positive body imagery in poetic works is clear—poets who communicate messages of wellbeing must employ positive images of the body along with images of the body in sickness and deterioration. Only through this combination of imagery will messages of positivity and accomplishment be clear.

Literary Application

Many poets have used positive body imagery to communicate messages of positivity and accomplishment despite sickness. However, a brief review of the effect of negative body imagery is in order. Historically, a heavy focus on bodily failure or violence against body (in poetry) has indicated a lack of psychological wellbeing in its authors. For example, Sylvia Plath, in “Surgeon at 2 a.m.,” writes from the perspective of a surgeon, who must view the body in cold, lifeless way: “It is a garden I have to do with — tubers and fruit / Oozing their jammy substances, / A mat of roots. My assistants hook them back” (Plath, lines 11-13). Here, words like *ooze*, *jammy*, and *hook* are uncomfortable word choices that remind readers of equally uncomfortable bodily experiences (*ooze* connotes blood, puss, pain, etc.). But discomfort lies not only in the word choice, but also in the specific comparison Plath makes to the body.

According to Edit Galla, in her article “Medical Dehumanisation in Sylvia Plath’s Late Poems,” Plath’s portrayal of the body as a wild, untamed garden or jungle breeds discomfort in humans (as a defining feature of humanity is order): “The representation of the inside as a tropical forest also conveys a sense of the exotic, foreign, and strange” (Galla 94). Later, Galla states that while this surgeon does his best to beat back the wilderness, “the surgeon’s procedure seems somewhat directionless and haphazard” (Galla 96). Furthermore, the surgeon notes that he is covered up to his elbows in blood, is if overcome. Finally, Plath does not leave readers with images of healing, but rather of patients drugged on morphine. The surgeon walks among his patients with “grey faces, shuttered by drugs” (Plath, line 50). While the poet’s negative portrayal of the body may

communicate her own pent-up negative energy, she never makes the transition back to healing and accomplishment.

While some may argue that these negative portrayals of the body may serve as a sort of catharsis for writer and reader, history proves that consistent poetry of this nature is dangerous. In fact, according to Michael M. Naydan, in an extensive comparison of Sylvia Plath and Russian Poet Marina Tsvetaeva (poets who both committed suicide), this repeated imagery in their poems was a form of rehearsal: “Through their assault on the body in their poetry, they experienced a certain amount of catharsis. The symbolic destruction of the body could have led to a diminishing of emotional tension. However, the ultimate attack on the body in both cases was self-directed and became a repeated rehearsal for an actual suicide” (Naydan 22). Plath, therefore, is not presenting a neutral message; rather, her messages negativity affected real-life consequences. Therefore, negative body imagery alone communicates corresponding messages of hopelessness, desensitization, and disorder (antitheses to positivity and accomplishment).

Inversely, poets have successfully used positive body imagery to communicate positivity and accomplishment even in sickness. While these poems do not wholly discard negative imagery, poets who communicate messages of wellbeing take a balanced approach, depicting the body in both health and sickness. One poet who adopts this more balanced approach regarding body imagery is Marianne Boruch in her poem “The Body.” Boruch starts her poem by personifying the lungs and bones. Personification achieves the exact opposite of dehumanization; it characterizes non-personal things. Already, the poetic devices used by Boruch change the tone of her work to one of positivity, not anxiety. She admires that the lungs take deeper and slower breaths at night. She is equally mesmerized how the bones and joints come to life with movement: “The body would like / a small mile or two. Thank you. / It would like it on a bike”

(Boruch, lines 12-14). Even when she finally mentions bodily deterioration, it is with soothing language, language found nowhere in Plath's work:

And the brain,
 locked in its strange
 dual citizenship, idles there in the body,
 neatly terraced and landscaped.
 Or left to ruin, such a brain,
 wild roses growing
 next to the sea (Boruch, lines 26-32).

The word *landscape* produces the opposite effect as the wild gardens from Plath's work—here, this body imagery connotes the orderliness of the brain, even if matched later with *ruin*, connotating cognitive decline. Mental deterioration, as is accompanied with old age, is even compared to a rose, the universal symbol of love, beauty, and romance. She finally writes that these roses, though thorny and tangled, are “the first thing / in the morning, the eye longs to see” (Boruch, lines 36-37). This last, important line shows that Boruch has come to terms with mental decline and old age, suggesting that aging holds its own kind of beauty (such as the beauty of rest and slowing down). Therefore, while Boruch is realistic about bodily failure, she uses positive body imagery to communicate equally positive emotion in her work. She also provides a form of victory over aging, cognitive decline, and death—accomplishment effectively communicated to her readers.

Emily Dickinson also uses positive body imagery to communicate positivity and feelings of accomplishment over sickness. Though many of her famous works, such as “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” feature themes of death, her body imagery is nevertheless respectful. Her

works also show a clear desire to use sickness as a way to understand her body or the world better (i.e. accomplish a goal). One such poem is “My First Well Day—Since Many Ill”:

My first well Day — since many ill —
 I asked to go abroad,
 And take the Sunshine in my hands,
 And see the things in Pod — (Dickinson, lines 1-4).

Immediately, Dickinson shifts the focus from sickness to health by starting the narrative with her recovery, allowing her message to be predominantly positive. She shows the body in health and the body engaged in nature. Nevertheless, she still allows for sickness to be a theme of her work. For example, she is reminded of her still-recovering, frail state when surrounded by thriving nature: “A 'blossom just when I went in . . . Uncertain if myself, or He, / Should prove the strongest One” (Dickinson, lines 5, 7-8). However, she does not dwell in negativity but rather seeks a form of accomplishment over her illness. She ends the work having even found purpose for her illness, and by extension, finding control over it:

My loss, by sickness — Was it Loss?
 Or that Ethereal Gain
 One earns by measuring the Grave —
 Then — measuring the Sun — (Dickinson, lines 25-28).

Ernest Sandeen, in “Delight Deterred by Retrospect: Emily Dickinson's Late-Summer Poems,” writes that Dickinson has actually reached a point of gratefulness for her ailments. Sandeen writes that “clearly her ‘Ethereal Gain’ through her having lost most of the summer relates to her often repeated conviction of the gain to be derived from willed or rationalize deprivation” (Sandeen 491). In other words, Dickinson believes that the beauty of nature is made even more

magnificent by her close brush with death, and sickness gave her an appreciation for what she missed while bed-ridden. Images of the body in recovery—a positive body representation—help Dickinson communicate messages of positivity and accomplishment amidst sickness.

Finally, Anne Bradstreet, in “Upon Some Distemper of Body,” also communicates messages of positivity and accomplishment through body imagery. Bradstreet first displays the body negatively and in pain, a technique which proves cathartic and releases negative emotion:

In anguish of my heart replete with woes,

And wasting pains, which best my body knows,

In tossing slumbers on my wakeful bed,

Bedrenched with tears that flowed from mournful head (Bradstreet, lines 1-4).

This work uniquely features both mental and psychical anguish, as often the two are interconnected. However, the middle line of the poem is the turning point (here, form aids meaning)—Bradstreet switches to positive imagery as she knows this is beneficial for her and readers’ healing: “Then eyes lay dry, disabled to weep more” (Bradstreet, line 6). Bradstreet’s eyes are at first overwhelmed with tears, but then they are dried. This is the transition to positive emotion that Plath’s surgeon from before does not attempt (he stays overwhelmed in the chaotic garden of the patient’s body).

Finally, Bradstreet moves to complete healing: “He eased my soul of woe, my flesh of pain” (Bradstreet, line 11). Herein these last lines is Bradstreet’s sense of accomplishment amid sickness: to her, sickness brings her closer to God—and this gives her an overarching goal in times of pain. Jean Marie Lutes, in an article for *Signs*, writes that this was frequently Bradstreet’s purpose in mentioning the body and illness: “‘Upon a Fit of Sickness’, she admits that it was easier to focus on spiritual rewards when she was sick. In ‘For Deliverance from a

Fever,' she praises God and begs him to heal her soul, 'Though flesh consume to nought'. She sees her illnesses as warning signals, sent to help her to resist the temptations of the flesh and to refocus on the covenant of grace" (Lutes 319). Though heavily influenced by Puritan theology, Bradstreet sees illness as an opportunity to draw closer to God, a form of religious accomplishment that gives her resilience in the face of sickness. It is Bradstreet's careful balance of negative and positive body imagery that allows her to communicate this positivity and accomplishment to readers.

Conclusion

Both psychological studies and poetic references show the ability of positive body imagery to further the poet's message on positivity and accomplishment (two qualities that indicate wellbeing). These messages are most pertinent to an audience dealing with mental or physical sickness. Furthermore, poetic messages featuring a transition from negative to positive emotion and accomplishing goals—such as recovering or understanding one's sickness better—can provide valuable examples of psychological wellbeing.

Conclusion

Clearly, there is great potential for poets who wish to use positive body imagery in communicating messages of wellbeing to their audience—messages on building strong social relationships, on finding a healthy sense of meaning, and on gaining positivity and accomplishment through sickness. When effectively communicated, these messages can better readers' mental health. Body imagery, though often sensitive in nature, is therefore a powerful tool that poets can employ in their works to great benefit.

Liberty University

Tomb & Temple:
Letters to the Body

Shelby Poulin
WRIT 690: Thesis Defense
Professor Heather Paul
12/12/ 2021

Inheritance

“The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them.”

Walt Whitman, “I Sing the Body Electric”

Bad Posture

Us two

crane our necks

like a pair of dandruffed,

powdered herons scavenging

treasure in portside blue, bending

like pipe cleaner just to view slimy, brined fish.

We are two tortoises in mossed-over bullet shells, stretching

out of our own bodies, this is how you taught me—strain to see

beauty, the sunlight curtsyng past peripheral, the calico scallop peeking

from beneath a sprint of water. Daughter like father, I sit before screens of radioactive

blue, extend my neck like a Kentucky Derby horse breaking a sweat, ignore the tightened

shoulder muscles, shoot for what's bright, *reaching is life*. Others chalk it up as bad posture.

Wasabi

I tie back my hair—this is how I get work done.

If I release, I let loose the smell
of a Mishawaka strawberry
patch, single hairs summoning
sound, like the sucking of leeches,
frogs mating lakeside near long-
grassed fields, spin of ATV wheels
turning up mud, kicking up sludge
like Pompeii, release a former me,
girl like earthen Wasabi, a wild
Indiana rascalion riding a dirt bike,
flapping her wild turkey wings,
crowing like a Rhode Island Red
chicken, smelling of deer, pellet,
and river.

I tie back my hair, hold back the flood.

Citadel

I've memorized you
from cadence to nail bed, memorized the shape
of your henna-dark shadow, cuticle's bend like a curved
kinetic bow, tanned arms the same sunny-hot as adobe pueblo, plains
buffalo skin stretched for tipi. Your genealogy is a Mary Poppins' bag of tricks;
eyes like indigo hyacinth, lottery blue. Your hair is a stew
of beautiful blonde broth, salted with greys, trusted
flavor—a fatherly warm, like worn-in leather
made for sinking. Your silhouette is relief.
I drape in your broad shoulders
and shape. Two flannel arms—
equal fire and thistle—wrap
me mummy, bloom
in a citadel.

Cracked Knuckles

I won't try
excusing the omelet incident
this morning,

rush-hour madness resulting
in a blackened
brunch; sunny-side-up
eggs
smiling in the chaos.

Really, it wasn't your fault.
How easily did those
unsayables slip over
my tongue

at the smallest burned breakfast?
I scorched your mouth into a charcoal
circle.

But I won't say sorry, still
I'll pay—

I'll atone
in metacarpals,

I'll pay penance in phalanges,

in prayers with monk-hush
feet,
in confessions with clasped hands,

cracked knuckles.

**Insomnia
(Watching My Husband Sleep)***

your sweet
scapulae, shadowed valleys, beam
chromatic in the moon's metallic
mouth

your breath
shifts pillow and sheet, tectonic
plates breaking in the silver up-
down

your finger
flex, force of habit, tugs my tendon
muscle-deep, reminds like a pinkie
string

your sleep
sears my bones, *husband* means
surrendered body, the double
one

your lips
two cotton wicks, flammable crisp
braids that my whispers
ignite

it's 4 a.m.—
still, I'm stewing in your rich,
sugared weight, with water-balloon
eyes

*wake up wake up wake up
baby
we outshine the moon*

*To be published in *Ekstasis Magazine*

Fingerprint

You're ribbed, grooved gypsy
legend. Let me pillage out
of you a story,
nomad tale in winding print,
pioneer tattooed to skin.

Curved path. Prophecy
in tiny fluted finger:
fleshy calling card.
Sometimes you're a soft pillow;
but sometimes you are calloused

rock, a deep searing
trail shouting, spilling family
shame—here is the year
none of us called; here are words
we begged to *bite the dust*.

They rusted orange,
corroded thumb and pinkie,
index deeply scarred.
Soft skin and regret parade
in a maze of fingerprint.

Bone Script

My mom on the Panhandle is searching for an unbroken sand dollar.

With same Greek foot, longer second toe, I walk the coast and look
for Scorpio's tail, the red stinger-star bruising against black.

Lean legs and wide hips and a laugh that will dagger-blast an eardrum are the hand-me-downs
from her. Sometimes this pleases me, other times I'm a knock-off designer bag.

I think she better carries herself, like a midwestern Cher.

It's like that movie *Freaky Friday* each time I eat 80% cacao and slam

my knee on a side table like some script I must have rehearsed in every grocery
isle line and grinding buckwheat in a South Bend kitchen.

Her scrawled notes margined in Psalms make mine forgeries, like my hand was always over
hers, knuckle to knuckle. Oblivious, I traced the patterns,

walked every pathed she scouted—in home, in worship, in breed, in bone.

Face Shape

I think

having a heart-shaped face
is quite like wearing
your heart on your sleeve, meaning
people think you must
be sweet.

But the heart

has a point
at the end of those bulbous,
warm mounds like two
Boston crèmes
stuffed to the limit.

The sharp truth sticks
from the end.

So,

about wearing your heart
on your face,
on your sleeve, in the iris,
in the dilated pupil or the curved
upper lip, wherever—
there is warmth
and there is bite.

The round, the round,
the knife.

Cutting Midnight Teeth

I pump Puritan muscle:
I work, and when I sleep even my teeth
 go grinding, side-hustling, clinking their ivory sides
together like tavern glass, tap-dancing
 to night-time jazz, drilling holes
in my enamel—anything
 but silence.

I learned to cut
midnight teeth from Mom,
 the patron saint of the *to-do*
(Funny, we're both
 in mouth guards).

But we're all addicts to white-noise, how else
do you explain subway passengers with plastic
 white buds stuffed in their ears
like the crème of an éclair, chasing out silence
 like clanging at a bear in the woods?
We chant in school *do not go gentle*
 and we promise.
We grind grind
 grind.

Yet I'm surprised
when days slip by
 unnoticed, like the baby teeth
my puppy swallowed,
 like the disappearing molar
under a toothless toddler's pillow.

Giraffe

My DNA reads
like piano keys,
a whirl of black-white crescendo
twisting me like pizza dough,
forming me into
my mother—
cookie cutter.

One strand
and *you're tall for your age.*
One strand
and *her hair is brown.*
Brown, the color
of nothing;
brown
the color of rust,
pipes, and
mud.

I would've died to be blonde.

I would have loved
to snugly fit
in people's hugs at five
feet, meeting their
chins, not eyes.
I never liked
looking down
on friends.

Yet
there is air
past the peeking leaves,
like a giraffe poking
her winding head above
trees,
that's sweet—
giraffes are elegant,
I guess.

I see my mother
up here, and find myself
bowing.

Anthropology

Breath—the smallest human particle. We are gluttons for it, guzzle air until we sweat, deliriously stuffed. Work and play produce the same hot dew, flaming apothecary brew, beads slide cheeks. Inebriated, we are drunk on the warm droplets. Sweat is our best guess. We force mysteries out of sky and earth this way, roots from ground. We say thunder in the Catskills are ghosts playing nine-pins; *aroura borealis* (in Inuit myth) are spirits of the dead kicking a walrus head, ceremonial sport against jewel-toned Artic dark. How else can we explain the ringing in our ear's chamber—blistering cathedral? How else to explain the green blaze, sky searing cornea to soul? Sweat waltzes with beauty in our simple anthropology: birth of infants, buildings, Olympic runners flying on feet—perspiration is ice and fire, a feeling in the numb, a body should be flung in *use*.

Repeat: we are not the stiff cornhusk dolls
forgotten in corners.

**In Second Grade, A Cold-Fingered Girl
Braided My Hair**

and I shivered,
skin bumping up
like tsunami
sweeping from scalp
to big toe

as she laid
her frozen Midas
fingers on my tender
head, soft and
untouched

to braid.

I was raptured
swallowed, thunder-
struck, plummeted under
a tidal wave

as she slowly
braided.

Dutch and French,
crossover, pull-through,
even cornrow

braids packed tight
like soldiers, prickled
barbed wire—

this girl, her name
I've lost, asked if she
was pulling
too hard.

In truth, I wished
she would never stop.

To Vera, in Sepia

To Vera, in sepia—

victory rolls tucked in a black-and-white
bandana, khaki shirt and bottoms
for the boy beside you, cigar timelessly
poised between his teeth. I see your sturdy
legs, wide hips, skinny arms—this polaroid
suddenly like a pool reflecting,
like the mirror I cursed this morning. But
on you the skin is vintage glory,
pin-up splendor, phenomenal
grace.

Another shiny, frozen moment of you
in a two-piece suit, striped and high-
waisted with sprawling legs like roots
into water: creek queen with the brushed
out curls. Your long toes are mid-flex
and I guess you could say those feet
are of the fifties, but they have met
the tech age too—your body is a time
machine.

So it was me, all this time, who spun
the record, you who swiped
silicon in the endless upward
scroll, lowering of needle, same
hand? yes, this view of the body—
fingers like family packed
in cartilage, hips like history,
vertebrae a surname in bone—
softens the brittle gaze, brings
grace.

Toes in Tokyo

The toes
in Tokyo and Tanzania,
and Toronto are the same—
we are the brothers
and sisters
of feet.

The hands
in Haiti
and Hong Kong
and Hawaii are the same—we
are a people with
palms, line-
paved.

The noses
of those in North
Dakota and Nigeria
and Norway are the same—we sigh
as equals at the just-
sliced mango,
perfumed.

The breath
of those in Brazil
and Boston and Bangladesh
is the same—we inhale slow
and softly release
just before
sleep.

Sister Speak

Sister, speak in fingers.
 Only you can filet
 playing cards like skinning
 salmon, skillfully gutting a blood-red
 flush from a pale deck, your pale
 hand and palm conceal queens, and other
 bold-named people from history. Your fingers,
 are long brushes—painter's hands—but sturdy,
 speak a logical language, mark out fives
 and fours like spotting constellations,
 like finding Cassiopeia's
 Seat in a dark sky.
 This is your suite, sister
 speak.

My fingers are silent coffins.

But my eye is a deeper
 pool, even my ear. Hearing
 Tchaikovsky I become morning
 dew, and you are the Sahara,
 desert sister. You cannot see
 in my glossy soap-bubble
 way, my kaleidoscope-tinted
 way, like eye turned
 to telescope lens, curved
 crystal for catching tears,
 won't hear swan wings
 in a violin's tearing
 string, sister
 I am
 speaking.

Your eye makes a shallow sandbar.

Sometimes, we are two exiles
 from Babel, screaming Greek
 and Roman in the other's flushed
 face, fury and sound equal
 to nonsense, talking
 is not understanding. I wonder,
 can we dilute to atom,
 build back from ivory
 bolt, down to joint and bone?

We are the same ghostly
frame without the skin,
the language we speak.

Sister, let's sit quiet for a while.

Femme

“I’m a woman / Phenomenally.”

Maya Angelou, “Phenomenal Woman”

Silo

I am crop, a scythe-
cut field shipped
to silo. I will feed my village,
miniature tribe, clones
that plagiarize my face
my features.

This the prophecy
to Pharaoh: the cattle
will not peek ribs
forever.

Just now, they are shadows—hungry
terrifying lovely. Life, most
certain. Greedy warm
wisps that will
materialize my nose
his eyes.

Tradition that out-
ages the nations: ceremony
of the tearing womb. A sacrifice
but beauty too, beauty
like the Savior's body
broken to feed.

Blue Plays Bone

Lately, I'm enamored
by cornflower blue, baby-
faced cousin of navy
like a sky romanced, blush of
beluga

enamored by telephone
cables cutting, sawing
through cloud, a tight-rope
against turquoise, circus of
azure

by teal acrylic splashed
on white, sea-bite, foam
infinite—blue is the blood
of college students returning
home.

Blue plays bone like saxophone,
single note striking the salty-
sweet—to my future daughter,
please, love every frost
hydrangea.

Do not adopt my hate
for sticking thighs, arm fat,
bloated Buddha belly—no,
love muscle, skin, the goosebump
flesh

that frolics in blue.

to the body hard-boiled

there's a saying
that compares tea bags
to women: you only know
how strong they are
when they're in hot water.

Sure, simmer
yourself, gingham
and frills, a gullible green
weed and let the water boil
in your trachea and just when you think
you've drowned—diaphragm a sizzling
dynamite stick—surface. Only then
will the world call you brave, body
like an egg hard-
boiled.

But I'm the runny
yolk, folksy and feather-
smelling, old fashioned
as ovulation, tear-streamer, flexible river
of waist and womb and "woman's touch"
and *so what* if I'm too
sensitive when I spill
with the stuff
of life,
can crack?

Cherry Top

You're a bud, girl, dreaming efflorescence
with a growing womb. Glowing womb like cherry top—the crème de la crème.

You're a working girl now, star-trailing, fist-fighting for a dream
that sits snug in your skull, with your nine-to-five

get-going womb. Soon, you're having babies like a delta dumping
life to oceans. You're the Nile rocking wicker-

basket rascals, your womb is flowing. Slowing womb: time flashed
like NASCAR, you're history-book beauty, suddenly

an old school girl in final flush, closer than ever
to tomb. The doctor says you're washed-up, wants

to trim with surgical tools. Greenhouse fades
to hospital grey, he is cutting, throwing womb. *Sowing*

womb, you've spread your seeds: painful but beautiful deed.
Your face full of poppies will not be forgotten,

sleep.

Factory

Spine

twirls
up towards
brain,
abandoned
dream factory;
according
to billboards—
legs reign
supreme,
and things
easily touched.

It's good

Hollywood
that female
minds
have shattered
windows,
shard-lined
linoleum floors
like a useless
December
pool, glinting
in sorry
excuse
of sunlight.

Its good,

that dusty
machines
for sewing
dreams
rust orange,
dull needle,
forgotten
foot pedal
exchanged
for cramped
toes—heels
that please
but leave
callouses.

Often
the problem
is me,
wanting *pretty*
seems safe
the best
investment, but
the spine
twirling
holding
this frame
has seen
my true
fabric
the factory
the dream.

Arachne

The Latin version, told by Ovid:

Arachne played the loom, plucked thread
like harp string, spun the tapestry
in Minerva's face, the later
a god. Arachne's weaving proved
equal to the deity's—a fatal
mistake. Minerva struck the mortal,
shuttle to skull, bashing down beauty
that dared grow up from any
ground but hers. Ashamed, Arachne
looped the rope, a promise-me-not,
to lift her from the ground, from human
things—but in some hand-me-down pity,
second-hand salvation, Minerva
turned Arachne into a spider
so she could weave to kingdom come
as a small ugly thing.

So really, this is the story
of two soft flowers fighting mixed
martial arts: a violet with bloody
knuckles beating down a lavender
stalk, the later swinging upper cut.
This is a sister who fights
her sister: silk turned spider bite,
petal turned gunpowder, female
turned feral, woman turned
black widow.

Fuji Apple Sisters

The Cherokee woman is beautiful—cherry mahogany, crimson garnet and copper river, rich metallic tang, warm like truffle.

The Japanese woman is beautiful—crowned onyx, straight-browed and moon silver like steady fingers stringing arrow to bow.

The white woman is beautiful—buttermilk puff, cloud whipped, rhinestone eyes flaming cyan, yellow bowing buckets of Barely.

The black woman is beautiful—cacao nib and night turned tiger, star shower of white teeth, branching hair like sweet bay Magnolias.

Every woman is beautiful—we were sisters once, packed in Eve like the seeds of a Fuji red apple, sent flying, forever split, when she bit.

Corset Strings

They want busted up
lips, red and crackling
with electric charge, two
swollen bee-sting pillows—*my*
pleasure.

But it's not enough:
they want décolleté,
bird-boned but muscle
toned, trim and curved
carved-up girls
like Thanksgiving
turkeys.

Waist trainers are corsets
for the modern age,
they still pull strings. No time
in history have
we breathed. Bow
to Botox, bow to needle,
praise the city with squeaky
people, shave down
your incisors, dream
syringe.

Cyborg

I'm pox-marked under the left eye—
I'm glad for that. A crooked smile
like high-sea piracy, that swindles
the breath from behind your teeth
(rebel cheek) is better. Better than
a mannequin's smile, stiff and cyborg,
shining like metallic glint from a scrap pile.

I'm brow-seared, hairs leaping off
my face like oil screeching from pan,
lighting caught stop-motion—I'm glad
for that. Hairs shooting comet, like sprinting
weeds, are better than the brushed,
2-D prisoners on photo
paper, wind under arrest.

I'm skin-stained green, sunflower,
bruise purple—a bleeding wisteria
watercolor. I'm glad for that.
A leaking garden, patch-work complexion,
is better. Better than the flaked, caked-on
crayon—some generic Fire Hydrant red
or politically correct *sky blue*—that never
dreams outside lines,
shades one way.

Magazines at Checkout—

you steal lavender girls
blackberry
lips halos of lilac
hair February's
rare amethyst
child a shoot blooming
woman for later in every sort
of purple trouble
roadside wild fig and

pluck
 pluck
 pluck

carve coffins in her nails
blacken eyelids in squid
ink dark and bleeding
take her bioluminescent
heart spray on blazing
devil horns
graffiti
push thirteen to the brink
of thirty, lie
this is your shade.

Wild Coyote

She's a stranger—that girl in the nectarine swimsuit, like a sunny
gold Georgia peach, wearing a one-piece with upside-down tulips,
wet bangs plastered above the brow, chlorine mixed with sweat,
ratty nest of brown curls tied back in a limp ponytail, chunky monkey
arms I've heard boys call *cottage cheese*, hung mouth like a wild coyote
panting, balled-up legs. She forgets to circle those stubby arms
around the knees, form the fetal curl:
half-baked cannon ball.

Who is this girl
on 90's photo paper,
jumping into the deep zone?
Whose face is a flame
of unfettered joy, Australian
wildfire blazing through brush?
Whose religiously
fervent eyes, shut tight?

I am a stranger to her.

I wonder if I will be her again.

Space Buns

I hid wrappers like a dog
digging to cool—I was a horse
craving the pixels of a sugar cube,
but shame was the bit digging
in my gums. I let the tongue steer,
this is my just desserts: shuffling
trash, concealing the Midas
gold of chocolate coins.

Chocolate, like Mom's torte
in mint-flavored first snow, same
candy from young Princess Leia's
pumpkin bucket,
same sugar cubes
we plunked

into mugs, Grandpa and I scoring
their dives, like Olympic judges—
these were warm,
and warm was nice.

But now, if nothing else, I'll
sabotage my own schemes, threat
of the too-tight button, the slander I
spoon down my own throat—to
crack their smiles. Not just
for Mom or Grandpa,
but for the twelve year old in space
buns, who still believes
she has nothing
to earn.

**Bear-Woman:
Proverbs 31 Reimagination**

She is terra cotta when she needs, earthen warm
such a breakable sweet. Home-grown, mud-slung,
song like nature, easy on shoulders.

She is concrete when she needs, steely
grey geranium; solid as Alaskan pine,
rotund iron trunk, bear-woman.

Praise the woman firm
and feeling.

Praise her flush
and frost.

She is silk when she needs, a flash
of violet, purple sash, a regal stretch of fabric
skin-fit, keeping midnight cool.

Praise the power
of her protection.

Praise the raised
ruby lip.

Rebirth

“He eased my soul of woe, my flesh of pain.”

Anne Bradstreet, “Upon Some Distemper of Body”

Harley To Ride

Your lungs were sacks, blackened
busted motorcycle
tires.

Goodbye.

You were the 8th World
Wonder, a body
of metal
magma and steel,
an unshakeable engine.

Hot-to-the-touch.

Picking up our jaws, we said
*Claude, you're built
like an ox.*

Rest now.

In a DC cartoon
my husband watched
on Sunday,
Wonder Woman
takes down Medusa.
An eye for an eye,
royal blood for
blood.
This was your fabric too,
you electric
atomic legend.
Sleep.

Four stars
in permanent ink
across your knuckles—
your four children
with you always,
even in
that florescent
Hell.

Sorry.

Your name is a name
for reckoning

for screaming
a name for ALL
CAPS
for saying with a savage fist-beat
to the chest, did God
give you a Harley
to ride?

Goodbye Goodbye
Goodbye
Goodbye.

My mouth will say until
my brain
believes.

Cartilage

Infant skeletons are made of pliable
creamy cartilage, making them as flexible
as a daisy stalk bending gymnast
towards the chartreuse grass.

And when babies grow, the connective tissue
is buttressed, braced instead by alabaster
halls of femur and other brazen bone.

The cartilage solidifies like liquid
gold to rigid bars, firming—but
often I wonder if we were not better
as wispy, bending, flimsier things.

Vestige

Dad is mummified:

hole-punched skin the moon craters,
vestiges of razing,
on the rippled banks of his forehead.

We sucked air, released at “basal,” still choked
at the gown.

He texted me, yesterday.

He asked could I still play *Lie Vie En Rose*—
I love you, B—do you remember when
you fought the waves
for dominance

in c-chords over Orange Beach?

He likes beanie-weenie

and documentaries like anybody’s dad. He
drives through the dark like anybody’s
dad. My siblings can sleep, but I swear
to pry my eyes—his co-pilot—

for the dark drive home.

Crabs on the Beach

is for idiots
 who slurp oyster mucus,
 enjoy neon migraines,
 like the vomited-up carnival
 of dad bods and middle-aged
 drunks, where sand cakes
 their ugly toes in rubber
 flipflops. They fillet
 their own flesh into red
 rash while I white-
 knuckle SPF 50
 like a life
 vest.

That woman from out of town
 box dyes to beach blonde, her
 work is hard—don't I work?—
 so she chugs
 her death row meal:
 one dynamite
 Pina Colada sliding
 down like
 cyanide.

And that heavy-set man calls
 himself *entrepreneur*—don't I hustle?—
 has zero reservations
 as he savagely mashes shrimp
 with sparkling
 veneers, rolling in grease
 like an unsuspecting baby
 shark in an oil
 spill.

I can see those oblivious morons
 as I shift on the examiner's
 plastic seat.
 The doctor hems
 haws
 blames this headache sleepless nights eye-strain
 and fatigue
 on *stress*—I'm
 furious

and fist-curled.

How do I have the hook
searing through my lip,
when the idiots at Crabs
on the Beach throw themselves in the net
blister their skin
like trout leaping
on the skillet

on purpose?

Night Walk with Orion

The dog sniffs, tugs near my ankle.
 Above, the galaxy—galactic bog—swims
 syrup, stews amethyst. Venus
 boils white. Orion sits square
 in the midnight swamp, rooted
 like Spanish Moss.

He's in black-tie tonight, dressed
 to the nine's, diamond belted. The dog
 whines—she's cold—but then he scoffs,
 mouth full of meteor
 and Scorpio:

You're dressed down, aren't you?

The dog is doing her business, this isn't Buckingham.

Well, I turned up crystal-cuffed.

Says you. Your body gapes, sea of space between your bones. I string
 your fragmented form together like connecting the freckles on my sister's
 skin.

You wrinkle.

You exhaust.

*A human body dies quickly.
 I've seen the ancient kings.*

True—I've spun around the sun thirty times. Time is closing in.

How can you call that a life?

How can you, a cold flickering light, never held in a warm fleshy palm?

*So what? I've never been touched.
 I've also never been burned.*

A soft touch does leave room for more.

It opens the door.

I'd rather be burned, than burn alone, I think.

The dog looks at us both,
eyes like skipping
stones, with a distant gloss—
a wave on hot tarmac. The glass
orbs beg to go
inside. I sigh, Orion
too:

At least we are more than her.

Charge / Retreat

Breath alchemizes to melody in the body, mouth
like an opera house, sound a fantastic Rube
Goldberg machine. First, diaphragm
catapults air, crescendo conceived in a pregnant
push up, and air keeps its head down like walking
in a snow storm. Larynx is a birthing pain—
final strain—before the break over vocal
folds, sound crowning. From sinus to teeth
to pallet shocks vibration, as cutting as a newborn
scream, music meets mouth in maternal reunion.
The folds, like winter petals, then close. Sound
returns to belly, goes home. Decrescendo.

See—voice is not the ragged edge of notebook
paper, not the tremble of a lie *always*, not the deep
version people use for bosses (don't deny this), or
the sharp edge of a conch shell—smooth and bulbous
until the corner's bite. Voice is the charge
and retreat, both sweet, the victory and fall.

Voice, too, is honey and heaven and nectar. Voice is great
gorgeous gospel. Voice is sticky warm balm. Voice is health,
song!

Alien

A little charcoal
piece of mechanical led
lodges in my palm.

I let it swim there
an alien
on foreign turf

knowing well
my body will push it out

when good and ready.

This machine I command
hand to foot
takes its time,

she's a slower cooker,
marinating. Give her
a week

and she'll heal, close
what's gaping, force
out intruders

defend her
headquarter, hollowed
ground.

Sonnet to Knee Scabs*

Dark scab, ruby gem, dragon egg, scarab
body, round and bugling—a current runs
under the blood cage, pink flesh of cherubs.
We are baby-skinned wielders with shotguns.

Porcelain warriors that kill for fun
makes good TV, yet one rusty nail will slice
a toe in real life, skin spread butterfly, sun
will cook people to lobsters—skin is thin ice.

But the body craves old paradise.
She speaks a maternal, native tongue
that heals and binds, that crystalizes vice
into a throbbing pact of blood, air, and lung.

Scabs are amputations, itching
for the garden. Scabs are the body, stitching.

*to be published at the *Christian Century*

Fever

Job 30:30: "My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat."

She gives a glass of needles, her forced-down drink
like swallowed back coffee grounds. Her siren song
is ripped nails down a chalkboard, prongs
that sear skin and muscle, bone pushed to brink.

Her dark lullaby is a screeching scythe,
a sound like splinter and hornet hum, a gift
like guillotine. She carves a cavernous rift
between her and relief in the simmering night.

She is hallucination, a graveyard spirit biting
frost into burning bodies, a mushroom trip
turning tongues to blocks and hands to lips.
104—she cranks the human mind to boiling.

Cracked cocoon.

I'm rebirthed in perspiration,
a wobbly praise
salts my tongue.

Swimming Veins

Koi, red-
spotted beneath snow
white water
lilies

is the blood
swimming veins upstream
under pale
arms.

Hidden crimson,
ruddy cinnamon shooting
through skin
spicing

our cheeks
in cold, biting
noses, sprite
kisses.

Anemic limbs
are lifeless tombs
without ruby
cannon

fire pulsing
through the fortress:
fleshy first
home

Syntax

The heart is a *verb*—

beating slow in the sleeper, pushing with muscled swimmer's legs, pounding like police chase, racing rose-blushed at that one weathered memory, stopping like frostbite in its tracks, doubling-back and pumping harder, sometimes skipping, always jetting.

The heart is a *noun*—

the aorta crowned atop
left and right ventricles,
red gemstone in a fragile
glass case, crowning
jewel of the human
race. The swelling blood
sings old Americana
like Copeland's *Appalachian*
Spring, or something old
Hollywood. The stage
folds around
the star.

Tapestry

I. She's trapped me in her stuffy attic. Blurred vision. It's 104 degrees, song of sweat and lucid dream. Fever heat. But she is silently weaving: fine needlework, her embroidery on me is clean. Imperceptible. Traceless, she threads white blood cells through the veins. In and out. Surgeon-steady hand, oldest friend, smelling something of instinct. Eve.

II. The umbilical cord is severed. I startle with breath, born again, still in sweat. Weakened. Limbs work like anything; you can re-learn climbing stairs, how to move without gasping for air. Stretching a hand to steady, knowing *it won't always be like this*. Crossing river Styx, senses return. Smells come back like season—like shoots, buds, spring. Animal pelts and coats.

III. A month later, I'm walking with elastic lungs. Sponge. Soaking the world with nerve receptors, basking like a snow bird. I'd like to feel a bonsai tree one day, the bark. Bodies are a tapestry of movement, craving connection. The body goes down, but she's a fighter with a mean roundhouse. She loves the underdog, the down and out. Just like the model. The Maker.

Stew

I am the over-heated,
worn-down
piece of technology
searing your skin.

I fail to meet demands
and the whole world
buffers—
for that,
you rabidly smash
my keys
with your palm.

Once, a while ago,
an English teacher said
you have an old soul, but
I am running out of excuses
in a sharp
square-edged silicon
world.

My calendar juts
abandoned from a trash
bin. My bones
aren't built
for the space-age; I'm busy

tasting red licorice and sorting
with curious buds the cherry
from synthetic
sweetness

finding my soul
unsheathed by one bird
chiming off a mathematically
perfect song

watching
the yellow orb
of a pendulum light
sway in the air
conditioning
like a planet rocking.

*Yes, I am holding you up
and taking
space.*

*This body is not transit.
I will not shuttle
but stew.*

Raising Monarch Butterflies

I free her—tangerine queen in wet wings,
cocoon like handcuffs at her feet, bring
her one banana slice. When her dark
legs stick, I pry her loose, and sans-remark
in seven days she flutters out, the sting *the sting*

like a slap. I must have hieroglyphics
for a heart when I too beg for the quick-
fix, palms-out prayers of getting, but forget
my sickness the second I'm free.

No, instead my tongue is scrubbed, psalm-stricken,
atomically silent, a mouthful of famine,
where is the praise? *Where do I get off?* I start
singing lest the rocks go gospel. Whose heart
is a blackened, stripped-down amen?
Is the monarch worse—or me—when free?

Whale Spa

yesterday, I discovered whale
spa music (the internet
is boundless)—somewhere between
singing bowls and spirit drums bellowed
a baritone, oceanic voice in low
tones, marrow-deep. That hour melted
like candle stubs to seconds. Was it worship
or a wail? I shiver from scalp to toe since
I know in my roots it's both. Our bodies
sing similar songs, phantom songs of hunger
pangs, songs of fatness, songs for walking
the plank, for dancing on suspension chords
above traffic. Songs of *so close*.
Bodies become rivers easily, fluid where
the solid joints should click, and all it takes
is a sickly branch, loose screw. But I choose
strength. I too believe the whale persists—
he must. One swallows back the blue
or is swallowed.

Nymph Prayer

I powder periwinkle, lilac, prism, dew on the apples of my cheeks, I wring
a cloud and squeeze the acrylic baby blue
from nail bed to tip,

let it drip.

I suck a strawberry, jam and juice, spread for rouge, my hair a garden of lethargic
caterpillars. My spine is made of bark, bends to a waltz
of wind through air,

nymph prayer.

I shed breakable bone, swap sickness for spring, for the neon green of the just-
wet grass, a flushed face for the body
blossoming back

glued cracks.

Girl like Sandstorm

My flesh was made
 from dust, is dust, becomes
 dust again—and all dust
 is good for is kicking up
 trouble, spinning
 tornado for the chaos
 of it

at least for a while.
 Sand is always a trapped
 thing, stuff of seeping
 hour glasses, boxes for children, or beaches
 bleeding to water—I'm confined too—
 a twirling Tasmanian devil
 under El Paso

sun, gunning against a range
 of Rocky Mountain boulders.
 I am nothing: grain against glory,
 the wind dissolves my
 ghost shape. But I'm whipping
 up a tumbleweed
 crown

down here in the dirt,
 slinging for some reward.
 Maybe He will slide me a smile
 (all He earned were thorns).
 Just in case, I'll break-dance
 in this dust body, girl
 like sandstorm.

Wedding Bells and Broken Toes

My foot was blue, limp, and lifeless like a belly-up freshwater Beta. I dragged my dangling appendage behind me, deadweight, toes gone lock-jaw.

“A mishap at the wedding means a happy marriage.”

“Perfect is spooky” –these were my condolences for the freshly broken right foot flopping beneath my white dress.

Well, I was going to have the best marriage known to man, apparently. I stared into the bruising indigo center of the breakage, looking the hurricane square in eyes—an ink blot on papyrus.

*

The day I tied the knot, I lost a body. My old bones split like a loaf under a serrated knife, like communion bread, scattered like dandelion fuzz making its big break.

The day I tied the knot, I gained a body. Gain was the gold slipping through each fourth finger, the pressing of peony lips together like two palms meeting in prayer, the chanting softly *until death*.

But broken bone, I suppose, is the oldest wedding vow.

His body too was broken and bludgeoned—arms stretched. He too is the bridegroom sweeping us up in ebony night, His congregation of smattering of star.

Description of Thesis Sections

This proposal is divided into four sections: the artist statement, critical paper, creative poetry manuscript of forty-six poems, and an annotated bibliography. Together, these sections will show the ability of positive body imagery to reinforce messages of psychological wellbeing. First, the artist statement will discuss my early fascination with physical anatomy, my vision for body imagery in poetry, the genre's literary context, and the significance of the topic to the genre of poetry and a Christian audience. The critical paper examines the work of traditional and contemporary poets who have featured body imagery and analyzes how positive representation of the body represents a healthy mental state in the author and communicates these healthful messages to readers. This section will include psychological support as well. My creative work includes forty-six poems, roughly split into three sections of fifteen poems. Here, I will explore my physical anatomy and body more closely: my familial body, my female body, and my body during times of illness and health. Finally, the proposal ends with an annotated bibliography, featuring the works that inspired my personal writing and supported my research.

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