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## ORDINARY BODIES

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The train rocks back and forth like a cruise ship—past Secaucus, Newark—and I watch as some passengers seep into the landscape, a phone call, or the scenery of the train, as I do. I'm riding the New Jersey Transit Northeast Corridor Line from New York to Hamilton, New Jersey. I could close my eyes if I wanted, imagine the map of the line, the larger sea of cables and docks.

We roll into Elizabeth. I watch those around me pick up pieces of their belongings off the linoleum floor. Each hand tender, deliberate in its motion. Outside, I see *Buckles Beauty Salon* stare back at me, and I study the deep crimson sign because it reminds me of the relation between beauty and blood. Beauty is bloody, even if the blood is hidden. Halfway to Linden, the book I'm traveling with (Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*) falls to the train floor, spilling a collection of notecards and papers with it. I bend down to pick up the mess and my seatmate—a blond-haired, blue-shirted passenger who has spent most of the ride analyzing commercial building documents—quickly rustles his papers aside and bends down to help. I am thankful for the help. But as he hands me my Whitman, with everything else splayed on my lap like plucked leaves, Joe (I will hear him introduce himself on the phone later as we approach Princeton) starts to stare at the left side of my body. He can't help it, I think.

We will lock eyes and he will give me a look of pain first, then sympathy. But only sympathy if he can get past the pain. Pain for having witnessed the atrocity of my body, an atrocity that sits against his ordinary body as deformity, *disability*. Or, he will avoid my eyes altogether, though his face

will grow as red as *Buckles Beauty Salon* and we will both silently know why. Without a word, he will mourn me—my disfigured, lost bone; my sutured flesh.

Joe is the kind of person who locks eyes, who needs to lock eyes with me in order to transfer his pain onto me. I accept it all because it is easier than the alternative. I take what he, in his shock, will not allow me to refuse. I console him for having witnessed me. I become a subject staring back at the object of me. I smile, say thank you, and turn to the window as the landscape slides into green oblivion.

The train rambles through the forests and deadwood bogs that make for a gray-emerald ride between New Brunswick and Hamilton. The forests help me recover, as they have often done throughout my life. The swampy, complicated mess, every jagged white pine—disabled, unforgiving. Here, between New Brunswick and Hamilton, I am a single occupant of the kingdom of missing limbs. The train-ship rocks on and all the broken geographies of New Jersey unfold before me. I take them in like sleep. In me, the turnpike wasteland, every Monsanto-slicked field, the deformed and glowing white pines.

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Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was the first book of poems that I laid my hand on as a child growing up in rural New Jersey. Remarkable about Whitman is his capacity for transformation—the natural world (and often the urban-natural) echoes in endless mutations of itself. As a child, I wanted to live there, inside the hopeful mutation of Whitman's eastern shores:

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;

[. . .]

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition [. . .]

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,

And it means, [. . .]

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

The grass transforms under Whitman's pen, and not only the grass, but also (especially for me) the body. Who was I to love the mutations, to love them as symbol and language, as myth and unforgiving material? I was my

mutated self and I found love in Whitman for the parts of my body that others could not.

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I return from New Jersey later that evening and sit alongside Riverside Park with my seven-year-old dog who, having been deprived of attention all day, manages to nose her way to the adoring hands of evening walkers. The parkgoers do not know this when they meet her, but Sadie, too, is a member of the kingdom. She was born, as I was, without one of her limbs. People notice only when she's surrendered to a belly-rub, though sometimes I get confused or evil stares when passersby think that I'm forcing an injured dog to walk. Injury of course bears a kind of affective likeness to disability, at least for those who have never been labeled disabled.

Sadie has only two speeds—*sprint* and *lie*—so when she hops up to a woman near 115th Street and Riverside and I watch the woman's face twist like a Van Gogh sky, I hide my small left arm, my half-limb, my wretched emerald, behind my back. I am skilled at this, having learned how to perfect such moves in fifth grade in front of the tire swing. Hiding part of your body is all about angles: *lean left, turn your back slightly, always smile*. I am an illusionist in these scenarios. Sadie is not.

The woman begins to pet Sadie, and Sadie melts into a pile of hair—her eyes closed in delight, her tongue cartoonishly stretched out the side of her mouth. She rolls onto her back and in one grand motion has placed all of her three paws in the air. Like the limbless white pines, she is unforgivably here. *It's such a shame, the woman says. It must be so difficult for her, you know?* I smile, turn away from her a bit more as if I were adjusting my legs, and then smile again, now with ease, now that I've achieved the right angle. *It is hard,* I respond smiling with affection. *I'm sure,* she continues without letting me finish, *but I guess it doesn't matter because she's never known any better. I guess you can't miss something you've never had.* I want to tell her that, yes, you can.

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Whitman is a complicated admirer of nature in *Leaves of Grass*. One of my favorite poems in the collection, "This Compost," gets at this complication well. It is a poem that contemplates the practice of burial. Whitman begins:

Something startles me where I thought I was safest,  
I withdraw from the still woods I loved [...]

Whitman is startled by “the ground itself” because it is filled with the “sour dead.” *How can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?* he asks. Whitman sees the dead as toxic—even unnatural—at the beginning of the poem and he worries that their presence in the soil will sour the earth. Whitman’s terror for the dead that the earth “hides” beneath its ordinary soil is not unlike the terror I saw in Joe’s face on the Northeast Corridor train. Nor is it unlike the twisting face of the Van Gogh woman in Riverside Park. For Whitman at the beginning of “This Compost,” the dead body is a toxic, unnatural abnormality that stands against the living, natural soil. I am Whitman’s terrifying dead and on the train, in Riverside Park, my body startles people where they thought they were safest.

But unlike Joe and the Van Gogh woman, Whitman knows how to deal with terror. He knows how to turn terror on its back. Like a good scientist, Whitman proceeds from terror of the unknown to curiosity and finally reverence:

What chemistry! [...]  
It [the earth] renews with such unwitting prodigal, annual,  
sumptuous crops,  
It gives such divine material to men, and accepts such leavings from  
them at last.

Echoing his revelation from “Song of Myself” (“The smallest sprout shows that there really is no death”), Whitman accepts the earth, and all it contains, as a renewing and renewed organism. Like the transformation of the grass, the earth itself transforms the dead into the living, and the living into the dead. What if we could accept the disabled body as a transformed and reverential thing, rather than a mutated one?

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Sadie and I walk out of the park. We make our way to our apartment, which is only a few blocks from the park’s pastoral entrance. The green vines work their way up the stone wall like tentacles. Sadie is visibly tired, and so she leans the half-limbed side of her body on my legs as we travel in our

building's elevator to our twelfth-floor apartment. Her small arm hooks behind my knee like the base of a curved umbrella around a wrist. I never refuse her leaning.

When we get to the apartment, Sadie finds her favorite spot on the wooden floor—halfway between the bedroom and front door (for she is keeping watch), collapsing with a low grunt into sleep. I sit down with her and rub her sore shoulders and hips. I hold her half-limb in my one, fleshy hand. I can feel the bone, the place where the bone stops. I can feel the other side of her. She doesn't flinch, of course, and I remember all those moments in elementary and middle school when other kids would ask *Can I touch it?* I would quickly comply, my body its own little *Please, Touch* museum. They would lean in and touch very slowly, the way an eighth grader leans in to touch a dissected frog.

I wonder about the different values of touch as I sit on the cool spring floor with Sadie. How touch can be simultaneously alienating, but also calming, as when Whitman "sit[s] by the wounded" to "soothe them" in "Wound-Dresser."

bearing the bandages, water and sponge,  
straight to the wounded I go,  
[...]  
From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,  
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and  
blood,

Though the loss of body here is much more avoidable and more clearly manmade than the situation of being born without a piece of one's body, Whitman nonetheless has much to teach us about different values of touch and especially the humble value of touch—touch that does not estrange one from the "stump of the arm," but that resigns. Touch that, in Whitman's words, will "remain faithful;" that "does not give out."

It is painful to read "Wound-Dresser" not only, I imagine, as an amputee, but also as a lifelong member of the kingdom. I think back to *Buckles Beauty Salon* and the real, material matter of blood. I admit to myself that I am jealous in a terrible way of Whitman's wounded, and of the care he gives them—the care they undoubtedly deserve. I am jealous of the memory, or

more appropriately trauma, of their loss, of their warranted phantom feelings. *I guess you can't miss something you've never had.* Yes, you can, but this is a complicated, lonely task. For it is a task that requires one to recognize that one has no memory of trauma, of the loss itself—that normal, ordinary body that existed preloss. Yet I feel a sense of the traumatic inside of my body every day, as I walk around the city in strapless summer dresses, or as I stare at my naked body in a mirror. I feel trauma, but I do not deserve to feel it. I want the same care Whitman gives his wounded, but I must admit that there has been no visible blood, no literal wound to dress. As I sit on the cool floor with Sadie, I realize that I don't fit easily into either category—the wound-dresser or the dressed—but that I am a bit of both.

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Earlier that day, I watched Joe fold his hands on the train, that way I've watched so many fold their hands in almost pious fashion and I felt lonely for what I had not been given, for what I didn't exactly know how to miss, but that I missed nonetheless. I felt lonely for a phantom that has always been a phantom. Lying on the floor now, I drift off into a dream I've had since I was young. All the missing limbs are together and they are hard at work tying a shoe. In the next dream scene, they swim Lake George. I, alone, have found them.

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