You See Right Through Me

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Human Animals

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My body is cast like a George Segal sculpture. The orthotist's wet hands land on the jarringly bony protrusion of my hip. The casting material, three to four inches wide, is wrapped up into cylinders like tape, then unraveled and soaked in the murky water bucket. He places the sopping pinkish gauze onto the hipbone, holding it in place while wrapping the rest around my torso, the strip ending just short of the steep curve between my nascent hips and waist. My only job is to stay still and not take any deep breaths; I am mummified up to my sternum. It smells like latex and chalk, feels like a wet washcloth soaked in hot water and rested on the eyelids to ease a headache, all of the heat escaping in a matter of fifteen seconds. It is now cold and damp, but hardening.

Standing there at Shriner's Hospital for Children in West Philadelphia at age ten, I imagine what it would feel like to be completely set in cast, and what pose I would assume. Simply standing straight, I think. Seal up the potential energy of motion and wait for a crack in the mold. I look down and notice the slight bulge created by one of my left ribs, a result of my overgrown ribcage. It doesn't bother me at this moment; the casting holds everything tight and vertical, two things I realize I will never be. I stand, eyes forward, wait a few minutes. It dries like the bright white stucco on my neighbor's house and creates a sprinkled mess around my feet. He slices the casting with a swift vertical motion and my body cascades out of the stillness, no longer stable.

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The summer after my junior year of college, I watch my grandfather use a walker that, for all of its brakes and safety features, rattles like a tin of loose screws. DME, durable medical equipment. The contraption is aluminum and four-legged; that makes six legs in total while in use. Its wheels are designed for any floor surface but not the sharp corners of a family home. Who decided to build this house with such a narrow doorframe to the bathroom? And whose grand idea was a staircase? The entire family is now aware of the glaring lack of foresight in construction. Who plans for getting old? My mom will plan for it, as will her two sisters and her brother.

He approaches the walker as an impediment rather than an assistive device, picking it up off the ground as if to move it out of his way rather than rolling it along. With each step the four legs hit the ground hard. The carpet absorbs the collision in a deep thump, but the linoleum in the kitchen echoes with the skidding wheels. There is no turning mobility for risk of compromising balance, so he comes up against the walls and corners fiercely, banging into table edges and dinging the paint on the wall. This sound is the clearest to me: it is desperate and fast. Slow methodical movements are dangerous in the same way that an inexperienced gymnast never lingers on the balance beam, but instead runs ahead swiftly, eyes on the other end, trusting in the familiar movements of her feet when they are on solid ground. I catch my breath and spring up from the couch every time, expecting something to catch hold of his loose clothing, or maybe nothing at all…

The four legs alternate with the clunk of his drop foot – the ankle brace corrects its laxity but impresses deep cuts into his already bruised skin. He looks like a puppet whose strings have been cut, the entire body too weak to resist the pull of gravity. We are destined to the ground, his wilting, heavy frame suggests. I

watch him clumsily navigate the kitchen but do not intervene. I've learned that the hand of assistance breaks his concentration and whittles away at something deeper inside. Cogito ergo sum. His mind is still sharp but he has come to resent it. A man who has worked in construction all of his life – he thinks it is the house that betrays him, not the hands that built it. Sacred hands. Walkers and wheelchairs and canes and beds keep us above ground for as long as they can.

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My youthful body also compresses under the weight of gravity, just to a lesser extent and in a different way. I don't feel the imbalance until someone points it out in a bathing suit at the water's edge when I'm seven. Then I start to notice it in the mirror – how my shorts fall on my hips unevenly. And then doctor after doctor prods at my naked body, saying, "Oh yes, it's definitely there" but never actually defines what "it" is. It causes that, and that will possibly exacerbate this, so it should probably be treated. All this time I feel absolutely healthy and able so none of it really bothers me. Or maybe I simply refuse to acknowledge what is going on.

The C-shaped curve of my spine is malleable, so a hard-shelled back brace lengthens my torso in an upward direction. It is smooth and white like marble without the grain, extending from my pelvis to my breastbone, with an extra piece added to apply pressure to my protruding sternum, the first brace of its kind. At my last doctor's appointment, a photographer snapped a shot of me wearing it for a medical journal. My face was excluded, but anyone close to me would know my body anywhere. I wear the brace to sleep at night but tear it off around dawn; the house in Cape May, New Jersey, has no air conditioning, and the August heat is sweltering. The rippling, crunch of separating Velcro causes my brother to toss next to me, but he keeps his eyes closed. The right side of my sternum burns continuously for a minute as the protrusion resurfaces. I throw the brace on the floor and fall back to sleep, my newly freed body sinking into the mattress topper.

My grandfather is always awake at daybreak, moving from the bedroom to the hallway to the bathroom and back almost furtively, his footfalls making no sound. The smell of his "Mighty Cool" after shave aerates the second floor and betrays his movement. Eucalyptus and menthol hit the senses hard, but it is a welcome coolness, invigorating in the oppressive heat. I delight in the first deep breath I've been able to take in roughly eight hours. My lungs expand and my ribs are sore, but my sweaty body suddenly feels clean, detoxed.

For seven summers this was our routine. He sitting at the head of the breakfast table, eyes wandering over a bowl of Cheerios and a glass of iced tea, quiet as my parents asked me how I slept and assisted in taking off the brace. He never told them about my early morning escape, and deep down I knew he never would.

I'm back at the beach house and watch him lower into the wooden chair and throw back a shot glass of pills. Dry, chased with nothing, as always. The breakdown of his body coincides with the healing of mine, I think. I am suddenly aware of the fading scar on my chest, vertical and visible in my triangle swimsuit top. And the four slits on the sides of my kneecaps. Despite them, I have never felt healthier or more 'normal.

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There is a falsehood that sits atop suffering – that you must do everything in your power to move past it, overcome it, recover, look back at it from an improved vantage point. As a teenager who frequented the operating table, I trusted in the resiliency of my young, albeit abnormal, body. But awareness of this transformation imposed a sense of obligation: have a fundraiser, start a new club,

become a doctor. I found myself standing behind a podium at a high school assembly on crutches with two full length leg immobilizers, asking for money for Shriner's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia, to give back. Still not quite sure what had just happened to me.

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I stare at my grandfather's tremoring hands and try to imagine what it must be like to feel betrayed. We all know he will not move past it, overcome it, recover, or look back at it. The end is coming, and he knows it is coming, and I know it, and we can't host a fundraiser to cope with it. Aging is simultaneously the most personally shocking and universally accepted bodily transformation there is.

On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were aging. – The Argonauts by Maggie Nelson

"Where are my jumper cables? Go get my jumper cables from the truck," he yells at my brother, a tone of urgency in his voice.

Chris stares at the walker for a second, confused, half-smiling. "Umm..okay," he mutters.

My grandfather hasn't been able to drive in years so he gave his old green Dodge truck to my eighteen-year-old brother a few weeks ago.

"They are behind the passenger seat, make sure you bring all of them," he clarifies.

The whole scene is heartbreakingly comedic: my brother handing off the cables, my grandfather's feeble hands tossing them over the walker and bringing them to the back porch, setting them on the table, then shuffling back inside. Every movement is strained but intentional. Neither of us dares to assist, and the subject of jumper cables is never brought up again. He still has no idea what is happening to him.

My grandfather loses his sense of self in pernicious waves of bodily deterioration. His mind follows suit, sharp as ever but in denial. My transformation was a different type of struggle, a quest for the formation of an identity separate from a body of ailments. I was the sick girl who "gave back," because I wasn't sure how to fit these infirmities into my self-conception. I'm still not sure. But some of them have been healed and some remain the same, until one day I too will wake up and feel myself losing everything. Or maybe I won't – I'll merely note that something that was once there is no longer. The fallacy of a neat, seamless physical identity keeps my grandfather banging around with his walker four years after his projected expiration date. He is strong where it matters, but I fear that the process of aging leads him to believe he is exiting the world as a substandard model. He is not, and I am not. Just variations of the same human thing. In fact, his physical decline is the most organic, inevitable return to the origin.

Where do we begin and end? I don't think we'll ever know.