

[This work], originally written for a creative nonfiction writing class, includes two essays investigating themes of loss, body ownership, self-objectification, and cultural tensions in my specific Chinese immigrant community. The title, *Nouns of Assemblage*, comes from the fact that at its simplest, a portfolio is a collection of essays (“For Joy” and “Colonial Skin”). In the same way, an essay is a collection of words. We are surrounded by other collections—other things that compile to form meanings and significance greater than the sum of their parts. We are surrounded by nouns of assemblage.

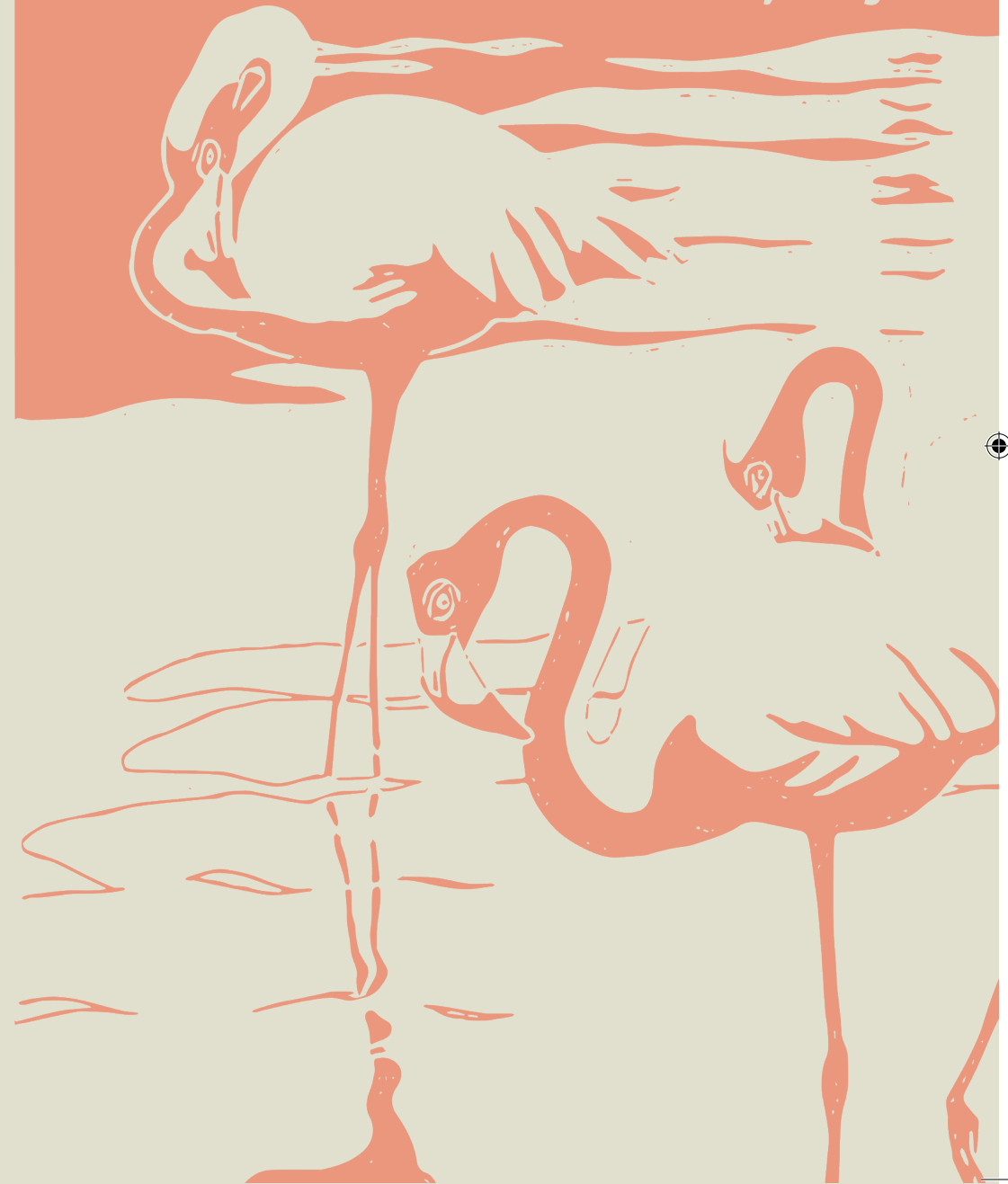
eleven40seven

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Texas Christian University

Nouns of Assemblage

Jenny Wang



Nouns of Assemblage: A Portfolio

Jenny Wang

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

5 For Joy

18 Colonial Skin

FOR JOY

During lunch, they descend on the grass outside the high school.

They are bizarre creatures—pink-clad, elbows tucked, necks extended. In a motion rippling outward like an unfurled wing, a hundred mourners lift one knee high and balance. The silhouettes of their folded legs cast shadows shaped like half-masted flags across the grass.

The local newspaper headlines the event: “Students, staff gather to pay tribute to teacher.” In the grainy photo printed, the principal squints into the sunlight, tilting on one foot next to the math department teachers. A dense flock of mourners assemble behind them. They seem heavy-hearted, but their heads are held high in respect.

The typical moment of silence is not nearly enough to honor a woman like her.

At least Ms. Joy Handsberry would’ve laughed to see the people who love her send her off in a bizarre and interesting way: by posing like a flock of her favorite lawn ornaments. Living, she held seemingly-infinite love for a variety of quirky and harmless things, like rubber stamps and Elvis Presley and plastic lawn flamingos. Of course, her love for her son, Max—the kind of love that followed her on two-hour commutes to and from work every day so he could attend the school he liked, and the kind that she and her ex-wife agreed their son needed from both of his moms regardless of what happened to that relationship—approaches infinity much faster than her love for anything else.

For the practical purpose of mourning, though, it's easiest to mobilize a group of people to dress up in pink and pretend to be birds. An unconventional expression of love, for sure—vibrant and unafraid of difference, like she was. But if an act like that shows how much she means to us, regardless of how

In the first few days after Ms. Handsberry dies, I miss her like family, and I burst into tears at the randomest of times—when I see a flannel shirt or a salt-and-pepper buzzcut, hear her favorite Pink Floyd album, or read her name in newspapers. During that hardest time, I make a list of things that made her happy: Max, math, teaching, 70's music.

If mourning is the process of healing the space someone leaves behind, maybe the fastest way to fill it is by channeling the grief productively against itself. Grieve smarter, not harder, someone callous has probably said before, so for the first few months following her passing, I do my best. Tucking away the unproductive feelings, I imagine who I must become to make sure her death means something. Grieve smarter, I say, like honoring Ms. Handsberry is a function I must find the maximum of.

In my first fantasy, I am a teacher. I paint pink flamingos on my windows and hang posters of my favorite musicians in the back of my classroom. My students adore me. Ironically, I teach math: the only subject I actively hated while growing up. It reminds me of performance pressure and my mom's angry, hurt face when I cry because I'm the dumbest Asian in seventh grade algebra, and I see her features shift at the exact moment when she internalizes my failure as her own.

So why would you teach math? I imagine my kids asking me incredulously. *Why do something you hate?* In my mind, they are naïve. They don't yet understand that adulthood is filled with disappointing, unenjoyable things you just have to do.

To answer, I draw out from my shirt pocket a carefully-folded sheet of paper. I let them admire the old handout—the ghost-like shadows left by the photocopier and the compact, beautiful handwriting that summarize important calculus concepts. The handout dates back to my junior year of high school. An ancient, holy text. The most cryptic of limits and theorems and integrals suddenly take on new clarity after reading it.

A very special teacher gave this to me, I would explain. She taught me how, with patience, you can see math move in the most beautiful and elegant of ways. She also showed me how, with even more patience, you can realize that you are much smarter than you know.

Ms. Handsberry passes away in the beginning of November of 2017. For the rest of that month, I seriously look into teaching certificates, convinced that this is the best way to honor her memory. To make others—strangers, even—miss her goodness like I do.

Teaching makes me feel closer to her, so I cling to it for a while. This little piece of Ms. Handsberry's legacy.

My AP Lit teacher is a petite but proud Barnard alum I spend countless free periods gossiping with during senior year. When I go to college, she becomes my lifeline to news related to Ms. Handsberry. Three days before Ms. Handsberry dies—another three days before the mourners would flock like a cortège of flamingos on the lawn, and before the church in Santa Fe holding her funeral services overflows with the bereaved—my literature teacher contacts me. She’s collecting letters for Ms. Handsberry, who fell earlier that day and was admitted into hospice care. I’m in my dorm room when I see her message.

The spread of the cancer has made it difficult to eat and get nutrients for some time. Unfortunately, the decision had to be made by her sisters shortly after they arrived, that hospice was imminent.

My eyes catch on the words *spread* and *hospice*.

My imagination stalls. I try to picture everyone’s favorite calculus teacher, with her generous laughter and great hugs, in a place where the to-be-dying finally go to die. My last memories of her resonate in my mind. After junior year, I would occasionally swing by Ms. Handsberry’s room to say hello, comforted by the way the pink flamingos painted on her windows and Elvis poster in the back of her classroom never seem to change. At the end of senior year, I asked her to sign my yearbook, and she wrote an encouraging note in her beautiful cursive. A few weeks later, we took a photo together at graduation. I started college, then heard from a friend that Ms. Handsberry has taken this semester off to recuperate.

I remember thinking that this rest will be a good thing.

The message continues—*If you would like to send personal wishes, we're collecting cards and other well wishes for Joy in the office. If you have any ideas for ways our students and staff can help bring a smile to her face, please share!*

I press *reply* out of habit and stare at the empty draft. My mind flies through a list of generic condolences. I reach for something profound and touching and uplifting, but nothing adequate comes to mind.

I tentatively type a few words—*Thank you for your life*—then delete them. Vague. I blink at the cursor for a while. Type—*We'll always remember your kindness*—then delete. Language collapses, reductive. The cursor blinks back at me, cryptic and judgmental. Anything I try is not nearly enough.

I struggle like this for a while longer, self-conscious and hesitant, until I promise myself to come back to it later. I close the draft.

This is how I unwittingly sacrifice my last chance to speak to her.

In my second fantasy, I am a doctor. My patient asks me why I practice oncology, so I tell them a story about *threes*.

I don't believe that numbers carry various degrees of luck. However, I'm also not entirely convinced it's coincidental that my calculus teacher dies on the third of November, three days after she enters hospice care, three months into my first semester of college, and three years after doctors first detect cancer in her ovaries.

Three is a trail of order tying these chaotic things together. I pretend that knowing this gives me control over something, so I cling to it.

I remember being a junior, entering my third year of high school, not realizing how difficult things must've been for her. When I asked her to sign my yearbook, maybe she was in tremendous pain, but she smiled and signed it anyway. In the photo we took together at my graduation, maybe the nausea made it difficult to even get out of bed that morning—yet here's the photo and Ms. Handsberry looks as happy as always. Not to mention teaching with cancer swirling around in her ovaries—but is it too romantic to say swirl when talking about cancer? Maybe fester is better, more respectful somehow?

Along with three, the other constant is my constant negligence in every part of this story. When she was living, I didn't notice her suffering—or maybe I just chose not to engage with it because inside I knew that nothing I did could make her better. Is that selfish? When she was dying, I thought I'd have more time to write my last words to her—or maybe I just wanted to suspend it all for a moment. To continue in the fantasy that life is predictable, and all stories have neat resolutions, and grieving only begins after someone dies. Is that selfish?

Performing this work is the way I feel closer to her. I'm doing my best to make it up to her.

In my mind's eye, my fantasy patient is tearing up. Silently, I cheer for another success. This is productive mourning. Healing.

I patiently share these tiny pieces of my beloved teacher with others, leaving them bits of my love for safekeeping in hopes that maybe one day these fragments assemble like birds taking flight, and gather into a perfect picture of her again.

Before the cancer metastasizes in her liver, I remember how eagerly my peers and I would honor Ms. Handsberry in the ways we knew how. We invited her to speak at commencement and to attend as our teacher-of-honor at scholarship banquets. My family happily donated to the fundraising events students organized for her. Whenever holidays or her birthday or the end of the school year came around, I would write her many beautiful cards with many beautiful words. There was always another card to write her sooner or later, and I never suffered from a shortage of beautiful words.

I become a math teacher, a doctor, to thank her. For the handout, and for the donuts. For always keeping her door open, and for 3 AM math help via text. For encouraging us to believe in our intuition, and for refusing to allow anyone to feel dumb. For loving us like her own kids, and for introducing us to that special, quiet blond kid who followed her into class one day named Max—the one we all automatically adore—by virtue of the simple fact that he is her son.

In my memory, our first few classes of AP Calc are about limits. Initially, the concept of infinity bothers me. The world as I experience it is finite, and outside the math classroom, most things are only valuable as far as they're quantifiable. I hear a metaphor once comparing integration to slicing a cake, and it frustrates me irrationally every time I think about it. Slicing up a cake into infinite pieces is impossible and hardly useful even as a thought experiment. Then to take those infinitely small cake slices and integrate that cake function with the expectation of ending up with one whole, undestroyed cake again is insanity.

Maybe she is like that smashed cake. Maybe her life is an infinite story, and sometimes it is about cancer—but maybe it is also *before* cancer, and *with* cancer, and *despite* cancer. Maybe it is insanity to try to reconstruct her entirely from the tiny slice of her time I cling to. In my memory, she teaches about countable, self-contained infinities, and looking back, it strikes me how much it sounds like she’s describing her own life.

How do you love and honor a person like that? By becoming like them, by becoming them? By mourning productively, making others see and miss their goodness too? Or maybe the answer is more concrete—like an essay? Or a simple note, as they die in hospice care, that says—*Thank you for your life. We’ll always remember your kindness—?*

That afternoon in November, before I delete the message, I hesitate. I spend many precious seconds staring at the blank screen. But there are too many things to say, and I can’t say everything, so I say nothing at all. I return to that cursor, blinking in the empty draft, all the time.

The summer after my first year of college, I fly back home. Five months since the last time I saw my parents makes talking face-to-face again feel like the kind of conversation that bounces politely between strangers. During the two-hour car ride home from the airport, we slowly get used to each other again. Around Santa Fe, my mom starts talking about my GPA and bleached hair, and I relax my hands around the steering wheel, gently turning on the radio just enough to melt away the rest of our complaints.

I drop by my high school to visit Ms. P. Her classroom is locked when I arrive and I consider leaving, when a noisy group of high schoolers pass where I linger in the halls.

I listen to them moan about finals, and my jaded, one-year-wiser-than-thou pride bristles.

Wait until college, I furiously think in their direction. College is a very special kind of try-hard-sleep-little-score-poorly-anyway kind of suffering.

But I don't tell them this. Instead, I look back on all the time I had in high school and the way that almost every day could make space for creative hobbies like painting and dancing and reading. I remember the brain-numbing summer boredom before any pressure to find internships started. I remember chatting with Ms. P about new books and learning from so many teachers who readily loved you—not for any special intellectual or academic reason—but by virtue of the simple fact that you were their student and they were your teacher.

I follow that feeling across the school and up the two flights of stairs until I find myself at the door. The handle gives under my hand, unlocked—the way I always remember it, although rationally I know that can't be true. I enter.

After seven months, Ms. Handsberry's classroom is no longer her classroom, but pieces of her are still scattered everywhere. Elvis smolders from his poster on the back wall. Her hand-painted pink flamingos keep vigil over the grass lawn outside their windows.

The teacher who's taken over her classroom smiles when I come in. Something about me—maybe my lost look, or the way I hesitate at the door—seems to cue her into the fact that I'm not here for her normal office hours.

“Are you here for Ms. Handsberry?” she asks kindly, rising from her desk.

I nod, and she gestures me towards the back of the classroom.

“We haven’t moved much,” she explains, gesturing to Ms. Handsberry’s various rock and roll posters. “We wanted to keep it more or less recognizable for, you know, the kids who came back and wanted to see her.”

We stop at the back of the classroom. The wall, previously covered with laminated math formulae or math jokes, is now covered with photographs. Hundreds of pictures tile the entire span of the wall—Ms. Handsberry in high school, Ms. Handsberry with her son, Ms. Handsberry in hot air balloons, Ms. Handsberry embracing former students. I wonder if our photo is there too—the one from my graduation, me in my green regalia and her in a snappy tan blazer, her arm around my shoulder, our heads pressed together. The one that, according to my parents, played in the slideshow at her funeral.

I glance over the wall to search for it, but her smiling face shines out from every single photograph, and I look away before this wall of happy memories blurs and crumbles when I cry.

These hundreds of snapshots preserve her. They frame her in a myriad of settings, with people I do and do not recognize, dressed in sports uniforms and regalia and Halloween costumes, in infancy and adolescence and adulthood and parenthood. We offer up our finite memories of Joy Handsberry on this wall, hoping that by assembling them, we will see a more complete picture of who she is. It is woefully incomplete.

For now, though—
—it is enough.

Before I leave the classroom, the new teacher calls out to me.

“The psychology teacher down the hall is compiling a memory book for her son, Max,” she says. “A lot of students coming through here told me to pass the message along.”

When I find it, the memory book consists of a thick binder, hundreds of letters slipped into plastic sheet protectors. I receive a sheet of construction paper and sit down to write. I stare at the blank page. I reach for words. It does not blink back.

In piano competitions, the period just before playing was always the most nerve-wracking. Seated on the bench, after the initial applause faded, I found myself alone in the sustained silence. The audience, still. Every molecule in the air, hovering in anticipation.

Sometimes I would stare at the keyboard and suddenly seize with panic. Black and white keys scrambled out of order. C and F became indistinguishable. I would forget my piece’s octave or key. Despite hundreds of hours of practice and mental preparation, my hands turned stiff and I couldn’t even visualize my first note.

To perform is to justify. The years of practice and costs of lessons and hours of frustration break your back, demanding recognition, insisting you must prove yourself.

I still feel calmest when playing in my house, the ambient sounds of the TV and my parents cooking in the background. There, and in front of people I love and trust, the notes never falter. Instead, they fall freely and gratefully from my fingers.

I picture Ms. Handsberry and swell with an excess of words. I picture Max and write to him the first ones that come to mind.

You've probably heard this story before, I start. I doubt your mom would ever let you forget it.

I write him a silly story Ms. Handsberry recounted to our class once—a story from when Max was still an infant.

In it, Joy Handsberry is already the most good-natured mom ever, and she loves gently tossing her son up into the air. She starts with him down between her legs before sweeping him back up over her head, her hands always safely holding his small body. She opens her mouth wide and laughs; he looks down at his mother and mirrors her happily, giggling and gurgling.

This is their game.

One day, she tosses him one too many times, and he spits up at the path's maximum height. Baby vomit flies in a tragic and comically perfect arc into her open mouth.

I was horrified, I write, crying and smiling. But your mom—she just laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

There are other words that come after that. Some before, too. There are probably spelling and grammatical errors I don't remember, and maybe an embarrassing, unironic teardrop dried in the corner.

Maybe Max will never read this page of his mom's memory book. Maybe in a bizarre accident, this one page is lost or damaged or otherwise rendered unreadable. Maybe he's heard this story too many times to spare it more than just a cursory glance.

Or maybe he reads it every day for the first few weeks. Maybe it makes him feel embarrassed or touched or nostalgic. Maybe it helps him miss her.

Regardless, she is here in this story. She is here in this outrageous, adorable, disgusting story—the one she recounted to her third period calculus class one random afternoon years ago, the one that would linger in the mind of one girl who missed her so much when she was gone.

I tell as much of it as I can. It is not everything.

For now, though—it is more than enough.

COLONIAL SKIN

Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper

Sylvia Plath, "Face Lift"

I weigh the paring knife in one hand, carefully considering the Granny Smith in the other.

Just by touching its green skin, I can already tell—this third apple is tougher than its siblings. The previous two peeled easily, decent apples albeit a bit soft, lacking the crispness and tart bite of a great Granny Smith. I expected as much from serverly apples. An hour earlier, I spent my lunch examining the individually-wrapped fruits, appraising them through the plastic before dropping the ones with the prettiest skin into my bag.

I gather the ingredients onto the kitchen counter—cinnamon, nutmeg, salt, sugar, flour.

When I was five, my mom taught me the secret to her tart, flaky apple pies. First, cut the sugar in half (her default adjustment for most Western dessert recipes, save for meringues which need the sugar to properly whip up). Usually, she would reduce the amount of butter and fats too, but never for pastries. Good flaky crusts need a generous amount of butter, kept as cold as possible until ready for use.

I fill a large metal bowl with water, crack a couple ice cubes in, and drop in my washed apples. I search the drawers for a vegetable peeler and, finding none, I rinse off a paring knife. My college kitchen recently reorganized, consolidating four small floor kitchens into the single large Sundeck kitchen. Only a minimal assortment of supplies survived the shuffle, so most of the tools left are replacements, bought new.

Like this knife. It comes in one of those plastic sheaths that ironically make me feel unsafe, afraid of slashing my palm while struggling to remove the cover. When it slips off eventually, it exposes the familiar edge of a paring knife. I imagine it pressed against the skin of various fruits—the thin, tight skin of an apple to the thick, loosely-tethered skin of a pomelo. With an appraising touch, I notice the blade is sharp. One slice, and the skin peels away.

For the typical human, our skin weighs in at an average eight pounds, stretched across twenty-two square feet of surface area. Wadded up, it's easy to imagine as the body's largest organ. It consists of three layers: the epidermis, dermis, and subcutis, listed in order of increasing distance from the surface. The epidermis constantly sheds old skin cells. The dermis carries an array of nerves and blood vessels; tattoo artists use needles to puncture and deposit ink into this space. The subcutis holds larger nerves and vessels, attaching skin to underlying tissues and musculature.

Skin is also a cultural agent. We categorize based on it, drawing racial and ethnic distinctions. In art and literature, we also use skin to characterize femininity and masculinity—the pure, unblemished skin of the fairer sex juxtaposed against that of the tough-skinned, impervious male.

Another, romantic view of skin imagines it as the boundary of the self. Author of *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and World*, Dr. Claudia Benthien calls skin the “symbolic surface” at which we encounter others. Its porousness confuses the distinction between *inside* and *outside*. It is a social, tactile creature, changed and marked by those that interact with it.

All of these approaches make finding one comprehensive definition of skin elusive. Its various purposes and qualities are paradoxical. Skin is material yet figurative, robust yet porous, intimate yet performative. Maybe this ambiguity is why we find violations of the skin—burning, tearing, shredding, piercing, puncturing—especially disturbing. An attack on the skin constitutes more than just an assault on nerve endings; it also represents the destruction of cultural property and a breach of our bodily plane of encounter.

Many forces clamor to colonize the skin. Each belief stakes its claims and outlines its territories, boundaries constantly intersecting. The resulting divisions invite a question of ownership: how much of your skin actually belongs to you?

I inherit my way of coring and peeling apples from my mom, who inherited it from her mom. The passing-down makes me suspect that this particular method is an Asian thing—a technique as ancient, dangerous, and fascinating to my white friends as wushu.

You use your knife to carve out a cone at the bottom of the apple, removing the little dried nub called the calyx. To peel, you slide your knife just beneath the apple's skin, brace your thumb on the skin against the blade, and slowly rotate the apple along the blade with your other hand. The skin should shave off like a pencil in a sharpener. If done properly, the skin easily peels away in one long ribbon. If done improperly, you end up with post-op appointments during finals week, frantically typing your papers with one hand.

The third apple was tougher than its siblings. Your knife gets stuck while you carve out the little nub at the bottom, so you press a bit harder and pull up and the blade abruptly rips out of the apple and imbeds itself into the base of your thumb. You immediately drop the handle and look at the strange appendage in disbelief, spurting so much blood that it can't all possibly be yours, before smothering it in a kitchen towel and dialing EMS. You call your suitemate, who arrives, buzzing with concern, and helps you wipe the bloody knife and the counters and the floor with bleach. While she cleans, you sit patiently and wait for medical services to arrive, observing that there is no pain in this thumb—this thumb which is not yours, but rather a dumb and dismembered victim in the path of an overzealous knife.

When EMS gets there, you stupidly explain that you were betrayed by your mom's fruit peeling technique, that you can no longer feel the right side of your left thumb, and that you had a backpacking trip planned over Thanksgiving break that you need to cancel.

They clean you off and recommend visiting the ER for a couple stitches. It will almost definitely leave a scar.

For centuries, humans have found ways to mark their skin. Tattooing in particular enjoys a long and global history.

The word *tattoo*, adapted from the Samoan word *tatau*, means to *strike*. Across cultures and over time, ink tattoos serve various functions: adornment, spiritual protection, marks of belonging, shameful brandings.

In the Philippines, tribal tattoos (*tatak*, in archaic Tagalog) functioned as status symbols. Filipino tattooists practiced their traditional tapping technique long before Spanish conquest in the 1500s.

Across the globe, in Egypt, archeologists unearthed tattooed female mummies dating back to 3000 B.C.E. Some believe that the designs, placed around abdomens or on their thighs, served as rudimentary forms of medical intervention.

Of course, not all perceptions of tattoos are positive. Within cultures, attitudes surrounding tattoos vary greatly by time period, historical context, and geography. At some points in Chinese history, tattoos marked the faces of prisoners and criminals. At other points, soldiers would tattoo their army's symbols or oaths onto their bodies. In one legend, the mother of Yue Fei—a Chinese general in the 1100s—pierces and stains the characters 尽忠报国 (*serve the nation with absolute loyalty*) across her son's back.

For the Dulong people, an ethnic minority in southwest China, tattooing the faces of women was common practice before being outlawed by the PRC in 1967. The historical purpose of the Dulong tradition remains ambiguous. Perhaps girls reaching puberty received the tattoo, pierced in the shape of a blue butterfly across her cheeks and over the bridge of her nose, to mark their passage into womanhood. Others claim the tattoos are remnants of tribal conflict, when neighboring states would attack, kidnap, and rape Dulong women. According to these sources, women marked with tattoos were considered ugly by their Tibetan neighbors. Perhaps in an interesting reversal to the common narrative, the diminishment of a woman's beauty was what ultimately saved her life.

The tattoos I've encountered are much tamer in comparison.

In high school, a friend poked himself a tiny heart on the side of his knee using a needle sterilized over a candle and a jar of ink he bought online. Another friend recently received a bough of flowers growing up her ankle for her nineteenth birthday, symbolizing her *blooming youth* (her words, not mine).

The most impactful tattoos to me belong to one of my sister's friends, an older dancer and violinist I worshipped as edgy when I was still a middle schooler. I remember this girl coming back from college, expansive black *forte* symbols on each forearm. They stretched from the crease of her elbow to her palms, obscuring yet simultaneously drawing attention to the thin white scars around her wrists.

The reaction from our Chinese church members was mixed. I caught snippets of disapproving gossip from our parents—especially from the moms who, for a period after, carefully watched the fabric of their daughter's sleeves, searching for any betrayal of ink underneath.

That surveillance followed me growing up too. The gaze was defensive of my appearance, and in particular, of preserving a vague sense of my body's *naturalness*.

When I started wearing makeup in middle school, my dad noticed immediately. My friend gave me my first eyeliner pencil during a sleepover the night before, and I naïvely thought my parents wouldn't notice. At the breakfast table, my dad examined my face and asked me why I decided to 涂那些东西在你脸上? (*cake that stuff on your face?*).

My reply came out flustered: *Why do you shave every day?*

My dad paused. Then he chuckled. And from then on, he would never question any of the stuff I decided to cake on my face.

I look at myself sometimes and pity my mom. My parents aren't particularly generous with compliments, but my mom was always attached to my hair. No one else in my immediate family shares this wavy, humidified mess. When I was a toddler, my *abu* (my mom's mom) praised its darkness, black as sesame seeds. An American salon I went to once complained that cutting hair this thick dulled their blades. For some reason, this was a source of great pride to my mother.

Since grade school, I've loved taking scissors to my own hair. Of course, I would also have to live with the consequences: years of yearbook photos capture me smiling under uneven trims, unflattering layers, unfortunate bangs.

However, I would never hesitate to cut it again once it regrew. Shearing my hair off without any regret felt a bit scandalous, like I was interrupting some sacred bodily process of maintaining *naturalness*. To so powerfully wield the ability to control my hair—an asset that supposedly made me beautiful—felt liberating.

Maybe this assertion of control is why I found those *forte* tattoos beautiful. Those marks were bold and coded and subversive. Tattoos for me back then were also scandalous—unspeakable topics, like sex or depression or queerness. When the girl came back baring her *forte* signs, she marked herself as unspeakable, but she trusted the ink to tell her story. It was always present, visible under the fabric of her sleeves. It blended into the smooth skin of her forearms, reclaiming the space depression and self-harm had occupied for a long time. To those who called her self-destructive, it was also the classiest *screw you*, translated into Western musical notation.

It was always so intimately hers and belonged on her skin, but for a brief moment, she rolled up her sleeves and shared it with me. It displaced itself onto my own body, and I loved it like it was mine.

I ask the ER lady to be gentle. I hand over my body.

When she unwraps the hand, she stretches the fingers apart. The clotted seam of the wound cracks open. She submerges the appendage and its fresh coat of blood in a bath of antiseptic. She runs a gloved finger against the gaping wound.

Saline and hydrogen peroxide stain red. Flesh burns, blanches. The fingertips turn white.

When she reaches for the body again, it flinches, retreating from her. The wound emerges from the tub like a fearful creature, foaming and dripping onto sterile blue napkins.

Two weeks later, I ask to stay awake during my surgery.

The anesthetist is young but self-assured, and 95% sure that my surgeon wants me to go under general anesthesia. I stiffen in the oversized surgical gown at the change of plans, convinced that everyone can see my blood pressure on the monitor hiccup.

He leaves to consult with my doctor.

I take a breath. I like my surgeon. He explains my circumstances simply and asks for permission before touching me. At my pre-op visit, we discussed performing a regional block instead of general anesthesia. The regional injection would press a needle into the cluster of nerves in my collarbone, anesthetizing only my left arm. It leads to a recovery with fewer side effects. It lets me keep most of my brain for my Orgo exam tomorrow. It also lets me breathe on my own.

I called home immediately after that consultation to explain the situation to my parents. Even though they lack the relevant medical knowledge to back their judgements, they took breathing on my own as a serious advantage of the regional block. Maybe they were influenced by Chinese medicine, which emphasizes control and self-modulation of the breath—气功 (*qigong*)—as a powerful source of spiritual and physical healing.

I personally felt indifferent about the Chinese medicinal implications. For me, giving up my breath meant relinquishing control. I would hand myself over again, my body signed away on hospital forms. If possible, I would protect it as best as I could.

The nights leading up to surgery, my dreams are bizarre. Heightened by finals, my stress fabricates a dream about my surgery failing and me waking up with my hand amputated. Another night, I dream that a lethal dose of anesthesia renders my left arm permanently numb and immobile.

I feel nothing, I remember calmly telling my dream-sister, stroking my limp elbow. *It's just decorative now.*

In these dreams, the fear is simple. Dismemberment.

Whether in pieces or in blocks of senses, I slowly lose my body. An accidental laceration of skin marks my incompetence in caring for it. I am irresponsible and my privileges must be confiscated. Like a small country, my skin—with its distinctive landscape and indigenous flora and fauna—is slowly taken over.

Medicine shares this skin-stealing tendency with Chinese and Christian tradition.

In modern China, female infanticide and abandonment leave the bodies of girls dead or as wards of the state. Millions more, estimates suggest, are hidden by their families, evading the massive fines families with multiple children often incur. In pre-revolutionary China, just after my great-grandmother's generation, the practice of foot-binding glorified the sanctioned crippling of women. Tiny feet represented the pinnacle of refinement and eroticism, and she depended almost entirely on her husband. Every step caused excruciating pain.

An ancient Chinese proverb states: *It is more profitable to raise geese than girls*. Here, the small consolation is that her body is technically still her own—not because she owns herself, but because it is worthless to steal.

In the history of Christianity, internalized misogyny promises moral rewards to women who stay silent. Her body is a shell. Her needs are shameful desires of the flesh. Martin Luther, celebrated father of the Protestant Reformation, notes in *Table Talk* that despite the innate inferiority of women, girls do mature faster than boys. The reason—*because weeds always grow up more quickly than good crops*.

When I tell people I want a tattoo, most are supportive. Others less so. They look at me with concern, ask, *Why destroy your body this way?*

To them, tattoos signal foolish impulsivity and lost purity and irretrievable damage to the skin and the body's *a priori naturalness*.

A tattoo, they say, lasts forever.

I am intrigued by this idea of permanence.

It implies that my body might exist forever, even after I die and my cremated remains are used to fertilize some tree or scattered into the sea. Or maybe it implies that *forever* is determined solely by my personal sentient experience on earth—a narrow and egocentric view of existence.

I'm intrigued that they only choose to incriminate tattoos when people encounter things that threaten the permanent destruction of their bodies every day. For girls especially, pervasive risks of sexual violence, paternalistic gaslighting, double standards, TRAP laws, systematic inequality, and every other kind of misogyny follow her wherever she goes.

So many strong and intelligent women I know speak through their tattoos. I admire the way tattoos are worn but also *absorbed*—healing to become a part of you, a purposeful blending- into. I admire the way some women obtain tattoos to reclaim ownership of their bodies after trauma. While ancient Egyptian women might've tattooed symbols to promote physical healing, many modern women symbolically heal themselves by getting tattoos.

The reclaiming—the asserting and recovering of the body—draws me to them. Maybe my fascination comes from paranoia. I look for ways to tether my skin down, because sometimes I am not entirely convinced that my body is mine.

I have heard it called many things—a temple of God, a precious secret, a home for eventual children. I have also heard it called many less-genteel, unpretty things—various synecdoches like *legs* or *ass* or *waist*. I have been taken apart for examination then reassembled. I fear dismemberment, but in many ways, I have been dismembered for a long time.

My skin, too, is easily confused. At once, they say it is a curtain of purity, holiness, and empowerment—at another, a canvas of eroticism, sin, and shame.

Unsure of exactly what it is, my skin crawls uncomfortably all over me. On any given day I might look at myself, confused at whether I'm supposed to be proud or ashamed of what I see. I've internalized many judgements I'm unsure of. I question whether the harms I feel are real or imaginary.

But at least I am not alone.

The women who share their weighty stories with me convince me of that. Maybe real and imaginary are equally naïve, and when they're stripped away from a story, all that's left is bravery. You must be brave to speak the realest truth you know.

Maybe the paranoia is not unfounded either—Atwood and Butler and Foucault convince me of this. The woman's body is constructed and manipulated and consumed. Biopower is real.

When it feels like my head might split open thinking about it, I cast aside the self-effacing Chinese-Christian-feminine and indulge in a bit of self-love.

I tell my body that I love the way it grows. It drinks up nourishment and adversity. It survives desert sun and hurricanes. It tears and repairs itself. Through all of this, it grows on, determined and resilient. Like a weed.

I wake up in the operating room, drowsy but happy to see my arm sleeping next to me.

I try to move it, but it doesn't stir. Everything from my shoulder down feels disconnected, unplugged.

Dazed, I wonder if my premonition came true and my arm is lost forever. But something inside me registers the way my arm's weight gently pulls on my collarbone—the sensation strange yet reassuring, like my body knows when its parts are properly assembled. I trust the nerves are still alive without feeling them, and I calm.

In retrospect, thank you, Xanax. At the time though, I drifted back to sleep, convinced: this was a magical moment of self-actualization.

Originally, this was supposed to be an essay about my first tattoo.

I was excited when doing my research: reading about phenomenological approaches to skin, surveying history, interviewing peers, reflecting on my personal experiences with body modification and culture. I consulted my friends, alerted my parents, budgeted, cycled through drafts of potential designs, and contacted artists.

This was supposed to be an essay about my first tattoo. But, as with many things, it suddenly needed to become something else.

My damaged nerve gave me the chance to write a different essay. I followed its strange and tangled story to questions I had while researching tattoos: questions about body ownership, self-objectification, and identity.

I still want a tattoo. Maybe sometime very soon. Maybe tomorrow I'll be the one rolling up my sleeve and sharing my healing body with others. But until then, I feel my sutured hand regaining a bit of sensation every day, knowing that this particular surgery only enhances the way my body already knows how to heal.

Regaining a bit of sensation every day, knowing that this particular surgery only enhances the way my body already knows how to heal would first like to know more about what's under my skin. I would like to undo bodily harm, both external and self-inflicted. For once, I would like to look at myself through my own gaze—to stare bravely at the beautiful cascade of recursive loops that is the Subject pondering herself pondering herself pondering herself. If I were opened up, I wonder whether I'd only find more confusion, or whether there actually is a solid core from which roots could grow. How easy it would be—to speak confidently, and to write straightforwardly—if I could know who I am, my body intact and shared, my skin readily opened and peeled away like paper.

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