

Autonomy

by Allison Kirkland

They were telling stories about my body even before they could see it. Stories of caution, of conjecture. "She's not as big as she should be by now," said the doctors. "There's something wrong, but we don't know what it is." So, a cesarian section brought me into the world 6 weeks early. The rest of my body looked like other babies, in miniature, but to everyone's surprise my hands had formed differently. My left arm was fused at the elbow and always sat at a ninety-degree angle. I had one finger on each hand. I weighed only one pound, sixteen ounces.

My mother lay in the cold white hospital room as doctors filtered in with bits of news. "Her chances of survival aren't good," they said, leaving no room for questions. "Her weight is already dropping. She's in intensive care." "Babies born this prematurely usually experience severe brain damage," said another doctor. "You should prepare yourself for that outcome."

At twenty-six I scour the available therapists on Psychology Today. I look for a counselor who specializes in relationships and who is located near my office so I can fit it into my lunchbreak. There are only a few who are taking new clients, and I choose the oldest, thinking that she might be wise.

It's summer, and the air is stifling as I walk the few blocks to her office. During our first meeting I tell her that I'm there because I'm ready to start dating for the first time. She seems excited at the thought, and requests that between sessions I think of places to volunteer as a way of meeting new people.

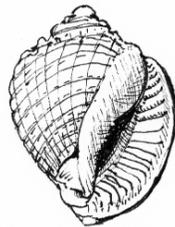
Toward the end of our second session, she looks me up and down, expensive-looking gold earrings jangling loudly in her ears. "I've been thinking about your problem." Problem seems like a surprising word; I wonder what she's referring to. "Men are very superficial. Last session we talked about volunteering as a way to meet single men. Perhaps you could volunteer at a center for the blind. That way you could meet a man who could love you for who you really are."

I stand up and walk out of her office, my body knowing the way before my brain can calculate what I'm doing. I never contact her again, but for years my brain repeats her story because it's a story I've heard from others, too, about what kind of love my body is worthy of receiving. I can only be loved by someone who can't see my body. Maybe she's right.

Later that week I'm waiting for the train at my neighborhood subway stop when a man humbly bows and hands me a few crumpled dollar bills. It's not the first time this has happened, but I'm too tired to refuse it. I take the money and nod my head. "Bless you," he says. I'm thankful for the connection of another person, that I get to witness kindness in a day where maybe others don't, but I wonder what story he's telling himself about my body that makes him choose me for his misdirected generosity.

I'm twenty-eight and getting a master's degree in creative writing. I'm the only visibly disabled member of the class and I'm trying, for the first time, to write about my body. We sit in classrooms high above a

(Continued next column.)



Drawing by Sue Sneddon

noisy city, sharing a long table, our stories on papers fanned out with red marks and penciled thoughts. I write something funny and grateful, and the class wants to know about my pain. "Are you being funny to cover over the shame?" they ask. They cock their heads almost in unison, asking questions about my stories that I haven't even thought to ask myself yet. I'm not sure. Maybe? But pain and shame are the only stories I've ever heard about what it means to be in a body like mine. I'm trying to show them that there's also something else, a kind of joy.

I don't have the words for it yet, but I'm spending my days in these classrooms trying to excavate my own story from the mountain of other people's narratives that have attached to my body like little remoras. Narratives I didn't even know I was carrying have lodged so deeply that I have a hard time telling which belong to me. It will take a lifetime to untangle them, to wrestle the stories of my body away from people who don't even know what they are taking away.

I'm 31 and on a date with the man who will become my husband. It's the first time I'm picking him up in my car and I don't know what he'll think when he sees that I perch in the driver's seat on a makeshift cushion and that two blocky knobs latch on the steering wheel so I can grip it. The car has been modified just for me. My feet sit on two heavy pedal extenders, the gear shift is latched with a rubber band. My body stiffens as his eyes explore the car. He doesn't say anything. Instead, he smiles as his hands roam across the unfamiliar knobs and buttons. I feel my body relax. I smile.

Eight years later, *Roe v. Wade* is overturned on an unassuming Friday morning. I feel the news in my body first. It's the same feeling I had the morning after the 2016 election of a man who will make some bodies less safe in the world. It's something I've felt before, from a time I can't identify or maybe even know at all: involuntarily stooped over, like I've been punched in the gut, like someone is stepping on me.

I can't stop thinking about what I've recently begun telling my creative writing students. It's not something I heard in my graduate program. I didn't even know if it was real. All I knew is that each time, it held true for me.

Make your writing practice an embodied experience, I tell them. I always stop here to see if they are listening, to see if there are any sparks of recognition. I say it slowly because it's important. When you're writing, or revising, you should learn to listen to your body. In workshop, when you're receiving comments from other writers, listen to your body.

When a piece of writing is finished, I say, you'll feel it in your body. What does finished feel like for you? The first few times I wondered if they'd listen to someone whose body didn't look like any of theirs, or if my words were already drowned out by the stories they were telling themselves about what people in my body could or couldn't do. But I guess maybe that's what teaching is, right? A way to share something you know with others? So I keep saying it.

Listen to your body, I say. This is so important. This is a part of the process. Don't ever stop listening to your body. When another student's feedback rings true, you'll feel it in your body, I say. When you write the truth, you'll feel it in your body.

Allison Kirkland is a writer based in Durham, NC. This essay won second place in the 2022 RCWMS Essay Contest.