



deviants

COLLEEN ABEL

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THE PAINTER'S MODEL

I was the woman naked in the grass,
on the chaise, in the water,
pale or rouged like the sunsetted sea.

His pleasure was amplified
by my pleasure: a book, a violet,
a thought, a smile in oil.

I had no desire for valor.
I was the one easily dominated by fire;
God had no balm or sagacity.

I was once a primadonna,
with blood colliding, regaling—
I was the snow dissolving

into tears that fed the roses
who opened as I did:
ready and svelte.

I was the death of that scent,
because there is nothing worse

than entrance, lost elegance,

the sorceries of autumn. I was
the open lawn in the far distance
between our houses.

I was the only delicious hatred,
slicked with horsehair, despised
with yellows. Sentenced by the hand

of my creator, I was as strong
as a woman could be.

I was gilded, a queenly delirium

for the sake of standing beside him.

THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S MODEL

after Robin Assner-Alvey

The eye alters all that it falls on. Your vision tricks to see the torso of some beast arching from primordial sludge when it's me, writhing under tungsten and the weight of crates full of Cheese Whiz. Even I'm surprised by the death mask of fudge my face becomes, by the rot of peanut butter and pie filling, by the glacial melt of marshmallow fluff off shoulder's slope and ass curve. I don't know what it's like to see strange shapes veiled beneath a plain surface. But, yes, there is pleasure in lying on the eye's altar, pleasure in the change, in the ash of powdered sugar in my lashes for hours after, in the candied phlegm I cough up in the shower, breathing in for a time with two sweet lungs.

DEVOLUTION

From this throne, thorny with velvet
I crawled on all fours down.

I took the brain-crown
ringed with slimy jewels

from the unhinged skull.
Scraped rough my knuckles

by dragging on asphalt,
slurred to blurred

my speech. Last,
I divested a watch, my rings.

The useless human things.

IN THE GALLERY OF STATUES & THE HALL OF BUSTS

Whatever is the opposite of wish, I have that now.

I write a poison pen letter to you, O armless

O eyeless. The priest learned it here: how to
crush you in his flowing robes. A lock

rusts in me. My arms want to widen, my
bones unfold: origami undone. Stupid

peopled highway, corridor of cocks and marble,
don't you know a reflection cannot possibly care for a reflection.

But hello Jagged-Broken at the Mouth, hello Sits
in Judgment, hello Caesar. All of you see

the vicious stillness in me. Don't you.

FAT STUDIES

The word *deviant*. A lovely, leering word, its two keening *e* sounds and the snap shut of its final syllable. You would never guess this body harbors such linguistic loveliness. This deviant body. I move it around during the day, along the asphalt, up the stairs. I tend to it in the shower, imagining that I am a gardener with a vast acreage to water and weed. I walk the body to work. I search out eye contact, but all eyes deviate. Look at me, I want to say. What my body says: don't.

*

In a 1960 essay published in *Sports Illustrated*, president-elect John F. Kennedy wrote about the need for American citizens to be more concerned with their physical fitness. American children were being outperformed in strength tests by children in other developed nations. He urged the American public to see their physical vigor as a matter of national security. The Russians, he reminded us, the Chinese. Not that our job was to sculpt ourselves into fighters, but with better bodies

come a stronger spirit and a sharper mind. We know that a strong will is not present if the body is soft.

The man himself is on the cover of that issue, on his sailboat, toothy and polo-shirted, his neat hair tousled just enough to imply Atlantic winds. *Mens sana in corpore sano*, he said. Sound mind sound body.

When a man like that tells you something, you believe it.

I find myself briefly thinking unkind thoughts about Kennedy after reading this essay. I think: a lot of good your mens sana did you, Jack.

*

According to the sociologist Erving Goffman, whose book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* was published in 1963, there are two kinds of stigma: discredited and discreditable. The discredited stigma is one that is instantly perceivable. Boy with the missing arm, middle-aged man with white cane, black woman, fat girl. Discreditable stigmas are essentially invisible. Mother with bipolar disorder, queer boy, man with a murder conviction. Their discredit is only a possibility. They are able to be judged, dismissed, pronounced inferior if they

refuse to keep secrets. This is vilification in potentia. Discredited stigma is past tense. Inevitable. One look at us and it is already done.

*

I am not interested in comparing, in playing Who Has It Worse? The discredited or the discreditable? There are enough failures of empathy in life as it is.

*

What would it mean to you if I tell you that I am fat? You'd want numbers. I know this because I want them, too. I care less about what skinny girls weigh, or what size Jackie Kennedy's waistline was (26 inches). But I look up the weights of famous plus-sized women. How tall are they estimated to be, I want to know, how many pounds? Am I smaller overall or larger? I am frequently the largest person in a room, but when I am not, the relief I feel is overwhelming.

Did I say before I was not interested in comparing? I may not have been telling you the truth.

*

Reportedly, when her daughter Caroline attempted to order dessert in a Paris restaurant, Jackie Kennedy told her, "You're not going to order dessert, Caroline. You're much too fat. Nobody will want to marry you."

*

Things the boys called me: Oprah Winfrey. Delta Burke.

*

I think of Goffman's subtitle: spoiled identity. I think of a plate of meat—slimy, gray, teeming with bacteria. I think of fruit collapsing in on itself, fruit flies frenzied around it. I think of what it must mean for someone to have an identity that has gone off, has rotted, has been tossed, landfilled, wormed for the compost. I wonder if Goffman might have been a bit more delicate in his choice of words.

*

Goffman suggests that there are six main ways that stigmatized individuals cope with their stigma.

1. Accept the Attribute

I like reading fat-acceptance blogs. I think I'd like the girls who run them. I think of myself as a kind of Thelma to their Louises, setting fire

to all the pickup trucks in the parking lot that have "No Fat Chicks" bumper stickers, tearing holes in our "Fat Bitch" t-shirts, applying red lipstick and posing for photos in our leopard-print bikinis. I'm attracted by their toughness, their aggression.

I am tough, too. I am so tough. I am made of a material other than skin and bone—in fact, something invented in a top-secret laboratory known only to the creators of superheroes. My heart is not a heart; it is a little nest of razorblades. I look soft, but if you touch me, your hands will be instantly pulverized as if you slammed them into concrete.

But you are not touching me. That is the point.

*

They go back and forth on the internet, fat-acceptance warriors and those whose job it is to remind fat people that we're fat because we eat too much and don't exercise and ignore science and threaten public health. "I love my fat body!" read the signs the girls hold up in their selfies. Then I read all the pedantry about why they shouldn't. It isn't about body image, the anti-fat crusaders insist. It's about health. No

obese person is healthy. My tax dollars pay for their health care, they say; I pay for their inevitable heart attacks.

I wonder about these internet anti-obesity devotees. Most of them are anonymous, but not all. Why do they feel so threatened by a girl who says she loves herself the way she is? What good does it do to throw obesity statistics at someone who has decided to try to abandon her self-loathing? And why would anyone want to?

*

I can stay on the internet for about five minutes, and then I cannot. Sometimes I react badly. Sometimes my husband stands by looking helpless, my husband who is so thin.

*

I like the fat-acceptance girls, but I am not one of them. If they invited me for drinks, they would see right through me, with their X-ray eyes, through my clothes to the dark nebula of self-hate that swirls all through my body. In disappointment, they would tear off the little gold necklace they had tenderly affixed to me that spelled out "F-A-T" in cursive letters. She's not one of us, they would say, and they would be right.

*

2. Correct the Attribute

Weight Watchers, where you can eat donuts all day as long as you stay under your points, not that it's recommended, of course, but you could, because that's the beauty of the thing. Jenny Craig, with its little cafeteria hot-lunch trays of food, and your freezer full of tiny microwave-ready meals, a pantry full of "shelf-stable" dinners. You can imagine the chemicals that make this possible, not that it's recommended. Slimfast with its muddy shakes that coat the inside of your mouth as if you've licked the dust off all your furniture.

I like feeling hungry because I imagine that it is how thin women feel. Like every cell in their body is made of gossamer and their vision flickers in wooziness.

Every time I deny myself something I want, I applaud myself, imagine taking my place in a long line of saints with their hair shirts and flagellations. I like the punishment of dieting. Read into that what you will.

*

In my intro to psychology class in college, we're talking about body types. I can't remember why, or what this has to do with psychology, but my professor says, "And you know how, whenever you're at the buffet or salad bar, everybody's watching that fat person to see what they're eating. Like, holy cow, look at your plate! You all know what I mean?" The class laughs—it feels like the whole room laughs but me. He laughs hardest of all, the professor, with his garish shirt and hairy arms. What point is he making? What is the lesson?

*

Q: How do you fuck a fat girl?

A: Roll her in flour and see where the wet spots are.

*

The laughter is the lesson.

*

Unlike other fat people, I can't say I've tried all the diets and I can't say I've lost weight through deprivation and that I've then gained back. For the past ten years, I've had a hundred pounds to lose and the same twenty-five keep coming on and off. I don't understand people who say

their weight "melts off." Any weight I lose melts in geological time, like a glacier melts, over what feels like a thousand years.

*

What Jackie Kennedy ate when she was trying to lose weight: one baked potato, with caviar.

*

I tell my therapist that the problem is that every day feels like some kind of battle, and when I survive it, to the victor go the spoils. Food is what I have earned. After months, my therapist gets exasperated. "If you really want to reward yourself with food," she says sharply, "retrain your brain. Salad is your new reward."

CONGRATULATIONS! reads the banner. Wild applause. Lettuce leaves rain like confetti. Salad is your new reward! I say it to myself.

I quit therapy.

*

Weight loss tips from Hollywood: Eat baby food. Eat raw only. Drink only juice. Drink only lemonade. Eat clay. Eat cotton balls soaked in orange juice. Don't eat. Don't eat. Don't eat.

*

The last time I was not classified as obese, according to the Body Mass Index, I was thirteen. I have no idea what it's like to be a thin adult. Once, and only once, I had a dream that I was thin.

I was in 1940s Germany, working as a spy. I was in a red dress, red heels, red lipstick. My dark hair was full, wavy. I was dancing with the Nazi officials in some kind of hall, trying to pry and get their secrets. I caught sight of myself in a wall mirror—the seducer, the *saboteuse*—and I was myself, but slender. Perfect. I shocked myself awake. What did it mean? What was the lesson? Would a thin self be somehow traitorous to the self I am? How useless, grasping at dreams.

3. Compensate for the Attribute

As far as I can tell, no one has done a scientific study to explain the correlation (if there really is one) between extra weight and a beautiful singing voice; in other words, why so many opera singers are fat.

Anecdotally, there are a few ideas: extra fatty tissue around the larynx improves resonance and tone; large chest cavities enable diaphragms to

expand more easily; singing energetically increases appetite. Allegedly, Maria Callas is said to have ruined her voice when she went from 200 to 117 pounds. She had a long affair with Aristotle Onassis, which continued even after he married Jackie Kennedy. In an interview, she says that the most important thing for a woman is to have a man of her own and make him happy. In love, she didn't need to sing. Her voice no longer mattered.

*

What are the options given a woman who is not beautiful? Be talented. Be rich. Be smart. The year I hit puberty, and became an overweight girl on the road to an obese teenager and adult, I started reading and writing poetry in earnest. When I was thirteen, at the homecoming dance, I was voted Class Brain. Each category of award had a female and a male winner, and they were supposed to dance with each other after the awards were announced. The male Class Brain hid in the bathroom so that he wouldn't have to dance with me. It's ok, I said to myself. I know which side my bread is buttered on.

*

God, my brain. It's so sexy. You wouldn't even believe how gorgeous it can be when it slips into that little thing you like, when it really makes

the effort. Its lobes look amazing, always—I know just what to do to show them off. Even when it’s synapse-deep in Shakespeare or crossword puzzles, distracted, immersed, it’s so perfect. You wouldn’t even believe it; I woke up like this.

*

In May of 2014, Irish mezzo-soprano Tara Erraught sang the role of Octavian in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* during a festival in Britain. A critic from *The Telegraph* called her “dumpy of stature.” Another critic called her “stocky.” A third, “unsightly.” A fourth, with more flair, described Erraught as “a chubby bundle of puppy fat.”

Q. What are the options given a woman who is not beautiful?

A.

4. Become a Freak

I could order the plus-size leggings from DEB with the french-fry print.

I could wear a Lycra bodysuit.

I could star in BBW porn.

I could star in “Nothing to Lose,” a contemporary dance troupe from Australia that features solely plus-sizes dancers.

I could join the circus and tour with the Human Marvels—be the next Dolly Dimples, the 555-pound woman dubbed “The World’s Most Beautiful Fat Lady” when she toured with the Happyland Carnival throughout the 1930s and 40s.

As I read about Dolly Dimples I note this: she is in *the Guinness Book of World Records* for the largest amount of weight lost in the shortest amount of time, getting down to 112 pounds in fourteen months by eating only baby food. She spent the last thirty years of her life thin, running an art gallery.

5. Use the Attribute as an Excuse

Here is the most painful fact of being fat: there is always new pain.

For a long time, I thought I was used to being obese. Nothing could surprise me anymore: the way people’s eyes ghosted right through me,

the not-fitting into airplane and movie theater seats, the umpteenth “Hideous Beach Bodies” clickbait internet listicle.

And then I got pregnant.

When I started to bleed lightly six weeks into the pregnancy and went to a high-risk ob/gyn, he put me on progesterone because my numbers were extremely low. The pregnancy was endangered, and so I spent as much time lying down as I could, willing the baby to form and uncurl from the embryo’s early seahorse shape to a fetus. At nine weeks, we heard the baby’s heartbeat, and the doctor told us that this lowered our risk of miscarriage dramatically. Two and a half weeks later, the ultrasound tech was saying, “I’m sorry” and I was looking at a silent, gray screen.

I did not think I was grieving. After the appointment, I went out to breakfast with my husband and mother, ordered something sweet and copious. I didn’t cry. I did something more dangerous: I went home and Googled. Article after article, study after study. I read popular magazines and medical journals. They all agreed: obese women have

double the risk of miscarrying their child than women of normal weight. By the time I had a D&C a couple of weeks later, I was convinced—I knew—that I was responsible for losing my pregnancy.

My deviant, inhospitable body.

Even now, six years later, with a healthy four-year-old son, I don't know what I think. Pregnancy loss happens all the time, to thin women and to fat women. Jackie Kennedy lost three babies, one to miscarriage, one to stillbirth, and one two days after birth. Three heartbreaks in a life that was filled with them.

I do not know who, if anyone, she blamed.

6. The Blessing Interpretation

For a long time, I think that the idea of fat as a state of survival, as a weapon, as a desirable tool, is a facile explanation from a psychology textbook. My therapist tested it out on me, and I was so ready to reject it that I hardly heard her. No, I said. There is no way on Earth I will

accept that I wanted this body, however subconsciously. No one hit me, no one molested me. There is no one I am trying to keep at bay with my unapproachable body.

*

Things the boys yelled: Moo moo. Woof woof. Waddle waddle.

*

This was a particularly narcissistic kind of ignorance, though. Statistics show strong correlation between early abuse—especially sexual abuse—and subsequent obesity. I began to understand for how many women fat was a defense.

About a year ago, I come across an essay by Laura Bogart that details the abuse she suffered at the hands of her father and how her weight functions as armor. She writes, “I choose to be fat.” She writes, “my body sheathed me in distance.”

Shortly after that, I'm in a room listening to Vievee Francis read her poem "Taking It." She's got the room in a rare, breathless attentiveness; she's not looking at her page, she's looking into a deep elsewhere.

In the poem, the speaker's father subjects her to repeated corporal punishment, then later, a boyfriend punches her in the mouth. "My bones would rattle if not for the fat I cherish," Vieeve intones. "Wouldn't you?"

I write to Laura. I approach Vieeve. Thank you, I say. Thank you for helping me understand.

*

Goffman would call my husband a "normal." Goffman uses the term "against" to describe the relationship of the stigmatized to the normal. I am the one who my husband is "normal against." This points to the ever, the always act of comparison. Abnormal can only be defined against what society judges as normal.

Against is also versus. Fat against thin. That which is enough against that which is too much.

But I think about "against," too, as "in contact with." I hold my body against his body. My so-bigger body, like Mrs. Spratt and Jack must have looked in bed, with nothing betwixt them but flesh and the thinnest

demarcating line of sweat. I was married to my husband for years before I stopped asking if I was hurting him in bed. His body is too beautiful to break, a thin stream of torso and leg and muscle.

I am sorry I cannot be this for him, and I tell him so. This is the foreign language in which I am fluent, and to which he listens because he loves me, but of which he doesn't speak a word. He does not see what I see, I am sure of this.

I wish I could love myself, the way all the fat girls I admire most tell me to. That's the first part, the most important part, unshackling oneself from shame. And so far, this is what eludes me. But I can hold this out as some sort of blessing: there are those we are not normal against who are not against us.

OF ELSEWHERE

It's true I like you better in the dark.
Deep dark. Where I can't even see your face.
It's not as if what's done there isn't work
that any man could do, so in the space
of my mind's poisoned fields, you're any man.
If it helps, I don't want to be myself
either—to slip out of this body when
you enter, to exchange within the puff
of magic smoke my life for another.
Leave me other. You must give me over
for one who cries your name, for one who cries
because you give her pleasure, not because,
in calling hers, you've dragged her from the black
of Elsewhere, and then brought her body back.

VENUS OF WILLENDORF

That which is most is most
unbearable a body
should be a length of string
a spine a taut yard of twine
the shadow a pillar
of dark marble

But the body
is a planet you tilt
on its axis spinning
zero miles per hour
at the poles
a thousand
at the sweated equatorial

Why must you speak
like that:
every dark thing
accessed, every excess

Fecund as a flooded valley
I plunder you
gasp-wracked

Unseemly the handfuls
of flesh

I think what you really mean

Ungirdle unstone

is I am ochre-soaked

cornucopiate

POEM BEGINNING WITH A ZEN PROVERB

Hide your body in the Big Dipper

: In Orion going cartwheeling over
flinging his shapely limbs
along his latitude

: In another neighboring galaxy
more massive than this one

 : In the gobbling black hole
at its center where it will be grateful
that no light will find it

: In clothes from the boy's
department at the resale shop

 : In your mother's hand-me-downs

: In your head when the boys
on the city bus bark at you suburbs
going by stereoscopic while you take
in all your sneaker's details
woof woof the oldest one
says Your laces are tied in an infinity sign

: In an infinity sign

 : In its curves : in its terrible
arms

: In your head

: In your head

: In your head

COLORPLATES

1. Crossing Two Bridges

With this image, I attempted to marry the boreal sound of the dulcimer with the feeling of an embryo as its exposed brain is covered, over the course of weeks, by flesh and bone. I began by breaking pencil after pencil. Working from top to bottom, I dragged the inked tuning wrench across the page to create the D major scale. Snow fell upon the page and blurred all lines. Like the embryo, I was eyeless, unaware, as the picture created itself, cell by cell, in some dark interior.

2. The Rowers of Skokie

The challenge before me: to create the color that recalled the smell of the Skokie River, the acrid plastic, sewage and soil embodied by the impasto smear of the mud brown, the fern green, forlorn azure. Day after day, I watched the rowers: identical girls with identically beautiful bodies, pulling water down the length of their muscles. For them, I employed sgraffito, scraping away the pigment, paper ripping through in half a dozen places.

3. Ballet of the Crooked-Legged Gnomes

No description.

4. The Feral Bee Colony

The question of abstraction or representation no longer interests me. All ways of looking at the world are dishonest. All artists care only about forcing you into the hive.

5. My God Was a Heart Made of Plague and Metal

No description.

6. Self Portrait with Veil and Orange

At three inches by three inches, this is my largest piece. Its full tonal range is now possible to see, thanks to the removal of a layer of varnish unwisely added in previous restoration efforts. The orange now glows with its customary painful vivacity. The darkness around the eyes and mouth, of course, are deliberate and thus persist.

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