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Writing the Everyday Breaking Body

ABSTRACT As part of his working toward a new book, *Writing, the Everyday, and Creative-Relational Inquiry*, this article enquires into the everyday body, the body's losses, joys, mess, beauty, and contradictions. It is an article about how a(n aging, White, male) body breaks, how it might (or might not) heal, what a body in its everyday movements remembers, knows, conveys, carries, mourns; what is lost but present. It begins to trouble and explore how we conceptualize "the body." Bringing to the page the everyday poetics and prosaics of the struggling, soaring, body, and the legacies it holds, the article looks for creative-relational possibilities for writing the in/corporeal. **KEYWORDS** everyday, body, creative-relational inquiry, Deleuze

This writing enquires into and with the body: the *everyday* body. The everyday body in three senses: the everyday body as the each-day, all-day, ever-present body, the body we live with, the body we are, the body we can't do without; the body's *ordinariness* (we all have one); and, in particular, the body's everydayness in a Deleuzian sense, as "a concurrent, reciprocating reality . . . a potential maelstrom of non-human becomings."¹ A body like any other but also a body that is relational, processual, extraordinary, excessive, "as much outside itself as in itself—webbed in relations."²

This writing—this body of writing, this writing-body—moves through, in, across, inside, and outside particular places, particular times. There and then, here and now, there and now, here and then: the past, present, and future carried back and forth between each encounter, each event.³

What follows concerns the body's losses, joys, mess, beauty, pain, and contradictions. It is writing toward how a body breaks; how an aging, White, male body breaks (though I wonder why I choose those three categories amongst many; why I choose to categorize at all); how the body might (or might not) heal; what a body in its everyday movements and moments remembers, knows, conveys, carries, mourns; what is lost but present. It is writing about how difficult it is to write about the body, however much scholars make claims (as I do) for embodied scholarship. Bringing to the page the everyday poetics and prosaics of the struggling, soaring, body, and the legacies it holds, the writing looks for creative-relational possibilities for writing the in/corporeal.

THEN, THERE: JANUARY 2020

I'm on a narrow sofa in my therapist's consulting room, the front room of a first-floor Edinburgh flat. She sits in a chair opposite, the other side of the fireplace, the window

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onto the courtyards behind her right shoulder. I have my shoes off and my legs crossed. We're half-way through the time we have together.

We've been talking about the pain I'm experiencing. This pain is persistent, present, a reminder each day, all day. This pain is localized, specific. It's physical, topical. You could say, it's "personal." And this pain is affective, pervasive, charging each moment, each movement, touching everything, all of me and beyond me, my body's gathering of "the impersonal forces that compose [it]."⁴

I'm talking and gesticulating through tears. Despairing. "Like this," I'm saying, "you see, like this . . . with my body being like this, I don't know what the point of me is. I don't know what my purpose is." It's an unexpected, even ridiculous, statement, even to me, catching me by surprise and despite or because of the tears, I laugh. My therapist doesn't.

HERE, NOW: APRIL 2022

My body is quiet this morning. Sitting upright on the café's dark wooden chair at a marble table by the glowing fire, I close my eyes, listening to the messages the body gives me. Except, at the table next to me, books between them alongside cups, saucers, and teapots, a man and a woman talk. I hear them, sense them. They seem close, familiar, intimate, an energy between them. Lovers, perhaps. She asks a question in French. They converse for a time—I gather their conversation is about the war in Ukraine, French politics, President Macron, something of his relationship with Vladimir Putin, but no more—then they speak in English, damning our Prime Minister for his ineptitude and follies. The conversation shifts into French again and I lose them. I am thankful for this. I return my attention to skin, muscle, breath, heartbeat—and to writing. How the body writes, eyes open at the page, head tilted to the right, pen held between the left hand's thumb and middle finger and forefinger, right hand holding the notebook open, blue ink appearing in curls and lines, scratched onto the page. I forget to breathe—and then remember.

My body-in-process, I, walked this morning, as we often do, up the hill from home, onto the High Street, and across to the campus—if it can be called a campus: the city and its university buildings fold into and between each other. I felt cold air sharp against my cheeks. I wore a hat to cover my ears. I wore gloves over my hands and fingers. Two sets: cashmere mitts and ski gloves. My outbreaths appeared, like mist. A late spring burst of winter.

Once on campus I went to the gym. I do this three mornings a week.

* * *

Note I'm taking you toward a section, early in this article, where I speak about a body that can move, that can find its place in a gym. The text will tell of what this body can do alongside also what it can't, today, but could perhaps in time: a body looking beyond its limits toward possibility. This is the body I bring you almost before anything else, although it's true you have with you the shadow of the opening scene with my therapist. This body I will bring you now is one that functions, one that serves me. How smooth some movements feel; a body's strength even as it falters. This, near the top of the article,

is where I am avoiding, where I resist, except for that momentary opening glimpse, offering you a sense of a body breaking. What follows in a few lines below is not a body breaking, it would appear, not a body lost, not a life disrupted. I first choose to convey this body's vitality, its energy, its strength.

I realize what I'm saying risks sounding arch, and I want you to see it for what it is. It's a strategy for image management. I bring you in on this strategy so you can see it. I want you to see this avoidance coming. Which you would anyway. I know you will know; and now you know I know you will know. I know you will see through this, through me. You will see me. You will also understand, I sense, how I am doing this for me, not you. I am hoping the irony will make the strategy seem less artless, less defensive.

I want you to think of me as vital alongside knowing my body's vulnerability. I want to think of myself as vital. I want to be vital.

However, this story about my early morning at the gym is also about relating, about encounter. Encounter with what's possible. Encounter with what's possible through and with another; with others, human, nonhuman, more-than-human others. Encounter with sound, touch, weight, breath. Encounter with teaching, learning, encouragement, hope, pleasure. Love, even. The permeable, porous "bodymind"⁵—movements and affect in continuous, looping relation—at work. The body itself as creative-relational inquiry,⁶ "listening to unintelligible attempts to lure."⁷

So, to the gym early this morning.

* * *

The soundtrack in the gym changes but stays the same. There are, I would guess, no more than thirty songs that play through the loudspeakers, over and over, round and round, the same thirty songs throughout at least the past six months. One, as I warmed up, stretching my hips, back, and hamstrings by sitting low into my haunches, caught me. It always does. *Therapist*, by Mae Muller. The song is a complaint by the singer about how tiring she's finding her lover's neediness. She's done with him; he doesn't need a lover, she claims—he needs a therapist. He wants someone to look after him, and she's not prepared to be that person. Off you go, she's suggesting, go get help.⁸

It is not a happy song, but it's somehow heartening. There's something about the strength in it. I admire her. The straight talking. The bluntness. The directness. This woman risks sounding cruel, almost, in telling in public the plain truth of this failing relationship, of this needy man, but there it is: she needs a lover, he needs a therapist. She's getting out of there. It makes me smile.

Sebby found me as I stretched. Meet Sebby: Sebby is my coach. My teacher. He is teaching me how to do Olympic lifting. I am one of his "junior" team, as he calls us; on his junior team there's me and there's Jim, also in his sixties, just a few years older. Jim and I meet in the changing room most mornings, greeting each other with tales of our latest lifting achievements, his retirement life, my university life, and our current injuries. Mostly our injuries.

Sebby is teaching me how to lift. He is my teacher. He speaks of me as one of his "students," not one of his clients. The first lift is the "clean," the second the "push press,"

and then how to link these lifts together, to allow them to flow one into the other. It's early days, but I am beginning to find myself in the fluidity of lifting. This morning, as Sebby watched me, he called: "Don't overthink it. Focus on the speed, Jonathan. Focus on the jump." I crouch, my hands shoulder-width apart on the bar, which rests on the floor. I look up, breathe in, hold. "Back tight, core tight, glutes tight," he demands. Keeping the back tight is a challenge. To enable me to *feel* it, he has asked me what I like to drink, and to imagine holding that favorite drink between my shoulder blades. So I picture a bottle of double espresso gripped between my traps, and the back is as tight as it can get. The bar travels slow up my shins, then as it reaches just above the knees, it accelerates, bouncing off the tops of my thighs as I jump, elbows hooking, body dropping underneath the bar into a squat. The knees and hips extend to standing, the bar resting across my collar bone, my quads, glutes, and core still tight. Standing upright, the feet move closer; legs bend, then a spring, heels lifted, elbows snapped, bar between my hands above the head. Lock. The trajectory of the horizontal bar must be straight up, my head withdrawn to avoid injury. Sometimes the bar clips my chin, affecting my confidence and the bar's path in subsequent lifts, my fear sending the bar looping out in front of me. Once, after this happened, Sebby approached close and said quietly, "Jonathan, you're closing your eyes. Keep them open. You're closing them as you spring. Closing your eyes is adorable but ill-advised."

This morning was a good session, the body smooth, eyes open, the bar shooting up fast and direct. Sebby, after one successful lift sequence, leapt from the nearby bench, excited, shouting, "Yesssss, make some noise!" I let the bar go from above my head to land on the platform and bounce. I clenched my fists and roared. Sebby cheered. Later, when we finished, when it was time for me to work and for him to see another student, we pumped fists, shook hands, and hugged. I told him I loved him.

* * *

This is one story I can tell. It's a story of recovering, of healing, of fun, of joy. A story that's with me now, my body enjoying the legacy of movement and effort in the dark wooden chair at the marble table beside the bilingual lovers, who are now silent and on their phones. A story where the body feels settled as I listen and write. My heartbeat steady, muscles tired, content. My body feels no pain. A body found. A body being found.

But the breaking body, the body lost, the body being lost, is closer even than my nearby companions. Closer still than the marble table and the dark wooden chair. It was there with me in the gym even as the bar sped from thigh to collar bone to sky. The breaking body is not only memory: it haunts, evoking fear and also teaching me, teaching me how to live.⁹ The body is always breaking, always dying,¹⁰ its life always letting death in; and the body breaks in order to live; its muscles tear to grow.

This breaking body is here now in the movement of fingers on keys, in the stillness, in the body's happy rhythms. It was in the lifting bar, in the sweat, in the roar; and now, here in the writing quiet, there remains the fragility and vulnerability of the weeks, the months, of despair, the moments where skin raged and protested; and when, like that, I no longer knew what the point of me was. This is the body not as fixed and discrete but as Deleuzian event, constituted in its relations with other bodies and affects, always in process.¹¹

I've been writing in fits and starts for weeks through the long period of what's been called the "lockdown." I write as I walk, dictating into my phone, during that precious time of being outside once a day.

I'm walking along my street, heading north. It's early morning. There is occasional traffic, an eerie quiet, like it's been for many weeks. My phone is in my left hand, closed, my headphones in my ears. I'm feeling what this is like, to talk/write while walking. Writing to the rhythm of footsteps. Writing at walking pace.

I needed to be outside to write this morning. I needed to not write at my laptop in the living room in the flat that has been my unfamiliar home since March. (Another story for another time. A life being unmade; a life being made.) I needed to feel the ground under my feet. I needed to hear birds, their songs so clear, so vivid, so strong, as if you could reach up and touch the notes that pierce the city's quiet. I needed to fill my lungs with the warm-chill air.

A bin lorry approaches, disturbing all. It pulls up beside me, and two men jump off the platform at the back. I stop writing-talking, self-conscious, as they busy around me. I stop also out of respect, for what I no longer take for granted. These men in their high-viz jackets, negotiating safe distance between them, are working for me, for us, keeping everything going. Where would we be without them?

I complete the circuit, a rectangle, around my flat.

I read back what I've written over the weeks and realize I can't offer it to an audience or a reader. The stories of doctors and inspections, of lights and surgical gloves, latterly of COVID-19 masks, and sympathetic medical staff whose care makes me cry. It's too much: too much for others, I speculate, but mostly too much for me. Too much information. Too personal. Too exposing. Too shaming. There will be listeners, readers, witnesses, whom I know; and there will be others I don't. I don't know which of these is more difficult for me to bring this to.

I know, I say to myself: how about I make this theoretical? How about I distract myself, and distract my audience, with theory? Invoke Deleuze, Guattari, Manning, Braidotti, Cixous, and my favorite others, the new materialists, the posthumanists, the poststructuralists, and explore the indigenous scholarship those discourses neglect. How about I write with them, find company with them, look to them for ways of understanding how to make sense of this experience?

Except theory is not a distraction. I know this. We can't move without theory. We can't live without theory. It was theory bell hooks turned to when she was in pain. "[She] came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend, to grasp what had happened around and with [her]."¹² Theory is in the body. We are bodies of theory. I often tell students (I think I tell them too often) how if we cut ourselves we bleed theory. Whatever I write here about the body, my body, these words are always already coursed through with theory, giving life to the words, giving life to the mortal body, giving life to my mortal body. Theory is traction, not distraction.

Or, I know: how about I tell a different story, not this one at all? Leave this one aside until it becomes a story of recovery, of restitution.¹³ Wait 'til then, ignore it, pretend it's

not happening. How about instead I tell a story that casts me, casts my body, in a more powerful light, one that serves to offer a better impression? Not a body in pain, not skin that's vulnerable, injured, smarting, not a fragile, aging body, but a (temporarily)abled, healthy body. A strong, unblemished body; a body that lifts and runs and stretches. How about I tell that story?

Except that story betrays itself in the telling. It shines a light on what it purports to obscure. It appears to offer the bounded organism of the humanist, medical body, whose "health" is judged by the stability of its internal self-governing systems. That body story is a cloak. As its words roll, it could not but tell how the body is always in flux, always disassembling and re-assembling in different ways, always being created in transient assemblages between the organic and inorganic.¹⁴ A body that's not interested in "being," not interested in what it "is" (or should be) but one that's pushing at what it can *do*, one that's always "becoming," however unwelcome and uneasy that is, however much pain ensues—and wherever that story may lead.

I know, I say to myself: how about I make this funny? So others can laugh, so I can laugh. So together we can mock the body's failings. My body's failings. Its skin fraying at the edges; wearing thin; its joke wearing thin. I could tell the story about going to see Joseph.

Joseph is a natural therapist. After months of seeing medical professionals without improvement, I make an appointment with him. I give him chapter and verse. He's attentive. He listens. He's easy to talk to. He asks if he can have a look. I'm used to this now. I show him. I drop my trousers. He crouches. He draws up close, stays there, viewing from different angles. From where he is, stooped, he remarks,

"That's not a very impressive specimen, is it?"

"Well, thanks. You're not the first to say that," I say.

He backtracks. "I mean the condition. The condition is not very impressive, not . . ." And he trails off. He tries again.

"It's not, you know, bad. The condition, I mean. Your condition."

I laugh. He laughs. "You just about rescued that," I say.

He prescribes two teas, one to drink, the other to soak, and suggests I take care not to confuse the two. Or at least not to use one brew for both purposes.

Yes, how about I tell stories that make us laugh? I need to laugh, even at this most intimate, this most personal, of my body's failings. How about I do that? Tell this and other such stories—there are many more—that render pain and loss, render failure, wry. That would make this easier.

Except the narrative of failure, Arthur Frank's *chaos narrative*,¹⁵ where there is no hope, is only one story to tell. Another is how the body is not failing, not breaking. Not at all. The body is doing what it needs to do. It's on a *quest*.¹⁶ It's responding, feeling, speaking. Its skin is charged with meaning. It has a message, a tattoo, and it is not only mine, and not only, not even, about me. "Skin is the literal and metaphorical borderland between the materiality of the autobiographical 'I' and the contextual surround of the world," writes Sidonie Smith.¹⁷ Skin that breathes in, breathes out—alive, sensitive,

making living possible. Skin that's affecting and affected. Skin that's holding it together, holding me together. Deep, deep, skin deep.

* * *

The national restrictions on our everyday movements ease. I walk again, headphones on and phone in hand. It's trying to be warm again today, and I find an empty bench by the river, and lie against the arm, my feet up. I close my eyes to listen. There's birdsong, a song I don't recognize. I open my eyes and look up and around at the trees. The one by me I recognize as an elm. (There are many I don't recognize.) Its branch hangs above me, giving me shade. I notice the bark on the branch is marked. The tree's skin is torn. I wonder whether the tree feels this tear, what this tear does, what it means. I catch myself. The elm will continue to do what it does, what it's meant to do. It will carry on doing elm.

HERE, NOW: APRIL 2022

It's time to leave my café spot. I have been here at this table by the window. I need to be at my office in fifteen minutes to meet a student. We will walk outside for supervision, which has been our pattern over recent months. We choose to do this out of caution but also because we notice that walking beside each other around the Meadows, the park behind my office, engages us, opens us up. The movement frees thinking, catches different affective dynamics. I look forward to it.

The table beside me is now empty—another reason to leave. I miss my unwitting companions' energy. I shift my weight onto my feet and, using my left hand on the heavy marble for balance, ease up to standing. I say, "ease," but the process of standing is slow, a struggle. Sitting for an hour after strenuous movement was unwise. The body loosens as joints, muscles, ligaments, tendons, blood, and breath renew action. The body is finding its way, finding another moment. "[T]he body, too, is . . . a phase,"¹⁸ writes Alecia Jackson, the body's shaping as I approach the café door, hand raised to push it open, being, like Olympic lifting, like pain, "the passage of the passing moment."¹⁹

On the pavement, I turn right. I cross the road toward my office and the Meadows and my student, following Middle Meadow Walk and its avenue of elms. ■

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NOTES

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