

TENDERING THE BODY

By

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ABSTRACT

This hybrid-genre manuscript is a critical creative examination of my own meditations with, of, and on my queer, ill body alongside teaching and teacher education. Throughout this manuscript, I posit and explore questions like: During a time where all people, but especially queer people, chronically ill and disabled people, and people of color are experiencing new waves of violence perpetrated against their bodies, their rights, and their bodily rights, how are we prioritizing care, caretaking, and connection? How are we finding and making tenderness for ourselves and one another? Academics, poets, and artists Ross Gay and Shayla Lawson asked a similar set of questions at a not dissimilar time, following the 2016 presidential election in the United States of America: what is tenderness? What does it take to make it (through/with) in America today? (London, Gay, & Lawson, 2019). Gay and Lawson came to *The Tenderness Project* because they observed a scarcity of writing both from and on softness and tenderness. Similarly, I have observed a scarcity around our own tendering of bodies in and around education spaces. Through research creation via essay and poetry and playwriting, I situate my relationship with tendering [and the lack thereof] with myself, my loved ones, my fellow artists and researchers and teachers, and my students. I ask us to return to the roots of tender—to stretch, to hold forth (Rosado, 2018; Brewer, 2025a). I share my experiences with tendering, which poet and academic Michelle Brittan Rosado compares to poetry, identifying both as a celebration of the in-between. Through my engagement in research creation, a process of making and remaking my relationship with tendering, I seek to cultivate an invitation to (re)imagine (education) spaces where we don't need to leave ourselves at the door, to (re)imagine tendering interactions and tender offerings.

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For Sophie.

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INTRODUCTION

The Body Knows: *Tendering* as Research Creation

*More and more I find my living and teaching and researching are poem-making—
meandering, lingering, constantly surprised by twists and turns revealing views and
vistas that take the breath away and then fill me with oxygen enough to explode the lungs.*

-Carl Leggo, Language and Literacy

Before I was a poet, I was a theatre artist. When I began my doctoral studies in the fall of 2020, I thought my research would be very grounded in theatre making, producing, and playwriting. My research interests remained grounded in arts-based research or, more specifically, research creation. However, like many doctoral students, my interests and my approach to these interests shifted over time. The primary factor responsible for this shift was my situated experiences with my own queerness and illness.

As humans, we are a species that necessitates connection in order to thrive, yes, but also to survive (Murthy, 2020). Despite this, there is a prevalent ethos that we must leave our personal lives at the door across professional spaces (Brewer, 2025a). No matter how much late-stage capitalism would like us to be able to sever our mind from our body and move about our daily tasks, this is not possible. The body remembers – ^{TM TM TM} – quite literally (Van der Kolk, 2014; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Menakem, 2017; Hammond, 2015; Dutro, 2019); many academics, researchers, and artists have written about how our bodies retain resonant, sticky fragments of our experiences as we move through (and genetically retain certain impactful traumatic fragments our ancestors have experienced (Menakem, 2017)).

During a time where all people, but especially queer people, chronically ill and disabled people, and people of color are experiencing new waves of violence perpetrated against their bodies, their rights, and their bodily rights, how are we prioritizing care, caretaking, and connection? How are we finding and making tenderness for ourselves and one another? Academics, poets, and artists Ross Gay and Shayla Lawson asked a similar set of questions at a not dissimilar time, following the 2016 presidential election in the United States of America: what is tenderness? What does it take to make it (through/with) in America today? (London, Gay, & Lawson, 2019). For Gay and Lawson, these questions became the foundation of a several years long project, The Tenderness Project, where they invited artists to take up these questions in necessity. On tenderness, Gay shares:

If tenderness is some kind of expression of equal necessity, that is, that you and I are equally necessary here, which maybe is another way of saying something like interdependence—reaching down to pick up someone’s glasses for them, or holding someone’s baby, or offering your water or home, or covering someone’s hand with yours—we need each other. We are each other. Maybe tenderness remembers the exchange is happening always. Which makes all tenderness both outward and inward—when I am tender to you, I am tender to me. I think that fucks with capitalism maybe. (2019)

Gay and Lawson came to *The Tenderness Project* because they observed a scarcity of writing both from and on softness and tenderness. Similarly, I have observed a scarcity around our own tendering of bodies in and around education spaces. As an artist-researcher-teacher, I wonder and write through the poetics of tendering in relation to ourselves as human beings who are teachers, who are students, and who, together, are something else entirely of their own collaborative making.

Through research creation via essay and poetry and playwriting, I situate my relationship with tendering [and the lack thereof] with myself, my loved ones, my fellow artists and researchers and teachers, and my students. I ask us to return to the roots of tender—to stretch, to hold forth (Rosado, 2018; Brewer, 2025a). I share my experiences with tendering, which poet and academic Michelle Brittan Rosado compares to poetry, identifying both as a celebration of the in-between. Lawson articulates a hope that projects like *The Tenderness Project* could be a way to cultivate a tender service via poetry, or “provide people a space where they could go and retrieve a small piece of that part of themselves whenever they deemed it necessary” (London, Gay, & Lawson, 2019). Through my engagement in research creation, a process of making and remaking my relationship with tendering, I seek to cultivate an invitation to (re)imagine (education) spaces where we don’t need to leave ourselves at the door, to (re)imagine tendering interactions and tender offerings.

Bodies, Embodiment, and Teacher Education

We believe embodiment isn't simply an interesting possibility for education, nor is it an alternative practice or method: embodiment is. Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, to analyze, celebrate, problematise it or not, we are all bodies, six point six billion of us, engaged to varying degrees in our own journeys of learning and living”

-Mia Perry and Carmen Medina, *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*

As a part of “Tendering the Classroom: Illness, the Body, and Teaching,” (Brewer, 2025a) I argue the importance of theorizing and *tendering* the body in teacher education, as well as speak broadly to its layers of absence in teacher education scholarship. I would be remiss to reflect on and theorize a poetics of tendering as it relates to bodies and education spaces without acknowledging studies in teacher education scholarship. Fortunately, in recent years, some teacher education scholars have begun to investigate ideas of embodiment in relation to education and pedagogy.

When deep reading into intersections of embodiment and teacher education, it came to no surprise to me that a number of research articles intentionally engaged arts-based tools in order to reflect on embodiment (Annamma, 2018; Bowman, 2004; Dixon & Senior, 2011; Halverson, 2021; Klein et al., 2019; Perry & Medina, 2011; Senior & Dixon, 2009; Winn, 2011). Separately, arts-based researchers inquiring into the impact of arts-based practices in classroom spaces have been thinking and writing about the body in education space for years (Barajas-López & Bang, 2018; Chavez, 2021; Flores, 2020; Hunter & Colón, 2020; Wilhelm, 1997) though as a component of the artmaking and not the focus of the research itself. However, researchers’ definitions of and focus areas related to embodiment vary widely.

Researchers have focused on embodiment in terms of spatial engagement, or the teacher’s body in relation to their environment (Dixon & Senior, 2011; Mathewson Mitchell & Reid, 2016; McDonough, 2016; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Perry & Medina, 2011; Senior & Dixon, 2009); body language and what it communicates (Dixon & Senior, 2011; Klein et al., 2019; Mathewson Mitchell & Reid, 2016; Senior & Dixon, 2009); emotions felt in and by the body relating to teaching (McDonough, 2016); the clothes teachers wear and what professionalism looks like (Mathewson Mitchell & Reid, 2016); as well as classroom activities that ask students to engage physically (Latta & Buck, 2008). Several teacher education scholars (Dixon & Senior, 2011; Estola & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2003; Latta & Buck, 2008; Ord & Nuttall, 2016; Senior & Dixon, 2009) drew upon Merleau-Ponty’s (1968; 2012) phenomenological ‘sensing and living body’ to inform their definitions, while others (Latta & Buck, 2008; Ord & Nuttall, 2016; Senior & Dixon, 2009) took influence from Heidigger’s (1997) argument that, “We do not ‘have’ a body; rather we ‘are’ bodily” (pp. 98-99). Nguyen and Larson (2015) draw on Dewey (1934), specifically for his writings on sensory experiences related to education, and Freire (1968/2007),

specifically for his writings on the relationship between critical reflection and action in order to better understand one's relationships with the world, to conceptualize their own understanding of embodied pedagogy: "a learning that joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction. This union entails thoughtful awareness of body, space, and social context" (p. 332). Each of these artist-scholars and scholars are stewarding important work, creating more conversation around the body and embodiment in teacher education where there had been little to none before. However, as Senior and Dixon (2009) note, "Predominantly, in the embodied learning literature, emphasis is placed on the part played by the body in learning or its part in teaching" (p. 23). Klein et al. (2019) note "explorations of the role of the teacher's body are largely absent from teacher education courses" (p. 19).

My inquiry into tendering the body as an artist-research-teacher is a departure from the recent studies around embodiment in teacher education. Writer, filmmaker, and teacher Ruth Ozeki contends:

It seems to me that literature works because we are all bodies, because we have bodies with which we respond to the world. Our readers do too. So when that experience is translated and evoked on the page, readers respond to it precisely because they do have bodies. If readers did not have bodies, we would not have literature. So the tie there between body and words is a really important one. (Myles et al., 2016)

Our bodies and what we make, our bodies and how we read the word and the world (Freire, 1985), our bodies and how we engage the world—these experiences are deeply entangled. From here, it is a short jump to argue for the importance of considering our bodies as lenses, or frameworks, informing not only our beliefs, identities, and (in)actions, but also informing the identities and treatment others put upon us. Because the body remembers, because we are unable to sever our body from our mind as we engage in day to day tasks, it becomes incredibly important to consider how we can care for—and tender—our bodies. Extending the idea of *care*, extending the adjective *tender*, a lovely idea in and of itself, is *tendering*. Ross Gay writes, "you have to feel your way around it, and tenderness is nothing if not feeling. But it's also a verb—to be a tender, to be one who tends. I know you can tend many things, but I go right to a garden, and so to cultivating and feeding and also spending time with the dying we do" (London, Gay, & Lawson, 2019). As artists and researchers and teachers, it becomes incredibly important to consider how we approach tendering ourselves and our communities.

Illness as a Gateway to *Tendering*

In the first chapter of the *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, Hesse-Biber (2012) writes, “Feminist objectivity asserts that knowledge and truth are partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational. The denial of values, biases, and politics is seen as unrealistic and undesirable” (p. 9). However, with word and page limits, it can be very difficult to articulate the complexity of each researcher’s positionality. In the context of tendering research creation, an expanded positionality statement is necessary in order to theorize and this expansion begins with a reflection on what events brought me towards this tender line of inquiry.

In Spring of 2021, I had eye surgery for a retinal tear over the semester’s Spring break. Since August 8, 2022, two years after beginning my doctoral program, I have endured over 50 doctors’ appointments, 40 blood draws and ~730¹ individual blood tests; various urine, feces, and saliva tests; three thyroid ultrasounds; an abdominal ultrasound and CT; ankle and foot x-rays; a colonoscopy; an endoscopy; a water deprivation test; and two brain MRIs, among others.

One week after my first doctor’s appointment on August 8th, I sat for part one of my comprehensive exams, a three day written test, which is evaluated over the course of several months, feedback is provided, and revisions must be submitted. In December of 2023, I defended my dissertation proposal. One week later, I had my first brain MRI, which confirmed I have a pituitary tumor. As I sit and write this, heating pad wrapped around my back, I am less than one week from my follow-up MRI where they will check and see if my tumor has grown. Twenty-one days after, I will defend my dissertation.

From January 2024 through today, March 2025, I have been drafting a dissertation, revising, attending writing retreats and workshops, revising, applying to jobs, and prepping for my dissertation defense. From January 2024 through March 2025, in addition to numerous tests, my neurosurgeon recommend surgery to remove the tumor, his colleague denied her approval to move forward with the surgery, I have been prescribed and taken off of immunosuppressants², my rheumatologist has denied I have an autoimmune disease, and then retracted the statement, subsequently confirming I have an inflammatory autoimmune disease, but refusing to name which until it gets worse.

¹ By the time this essay reaches you, this number will be higher.

² After experiencing dreadful side effects.

Many artists turn to artmaking as an outlet to process feelings and experiences, as a venue for joy, and as an opportunity to explore possible answers to questions. Natalie Loveless' book, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A manifesto for research-creation*, speaks to how art offers an opportunity for artist-academics to ask intricate, generative questions—questions that can scaffold different imaginings of what the world could look like—by engaging “sensuous, aesthetic attunement” in order to “focus attention, [and] elicit public discourse” (2019, p. 16). Research creation itself is transdisciplinary and prioritizes *process* during inquiry rather than the resulting product (Truman, 2022). It encourages returning and reflecting and revising. The revision, the “speculating, planning, and thinking” are integral to engaging in research creation; the making process “changes us and we change it... Thinking and theorizing are material practices” (Truman, 2022, p. 19).

Artists living and working in academia have identified *research creation* as one arts-based research method that lives under the broader umbrella term *arts-based research*. Recently, my artist-researcher self has turned to poetry and poetic inquiry to investigate and begin to make sense of the identities I hold and the roles they play in my life as both a student and teacher. As I navigate several emerging identities, including my numerous emerging chronic illnesses, poetry has honored all states of my body. When there have been overwhelming feelings, pain, and sensation, poetry has thrived as a method for me to engage my bodymind. When I write a poem, I can scaffold my body differently than when I write a play. The more ill I became, the less playwriting felt like the strongest medium to convey my current lived-in body.

SCENE ONE

(Lights rise on BRITTANY, a young person in her late twenties. BRITTANY is sitting on a couch, legs extended, with a laptop perched on her lap. BRITTANY looks down at her right shin, checking if the cut from nine months ago has healed yet. It hasn't³.)

BRITTANY
Still?

(She fidgets, often. Probably because of pain and discomfort. But that's just sitting. Right?)

³ Almost three years after the fact, it still hasn't.

BRITTANY

Ow.

(Except BRITTANY doesn't say that. BRITTANY doesn't say that she assumes all people go through the motions of each day with a constant undercurrent of pain. Why would BRITTANY say this out loud? Everyone experiences this. Everyone experiences this? Everyone experiences this. BRITTANY stifles a yawn.)

BRITTANY

Oof. God, I'm tired.

(BRITTANY says this outloud, to herself, but when she says this, she assumes all people move through each day feeling as if they are carrying a weighted blanket around with them. Why would BRITTANY say this to other people? Everyone experiences this. Everyone experiences this? Everyone experiences this.)

BRITTANY

Mmm. Wait, what's that word?

(BRITTANY says this outloud, to herself. This might be worth making a doctor's appointment soon, maybe after summer. BRITTANY thinks about how she has been losing her words more and more, about how her short-term memory has shifted markedly. A fog rolls across the stage. BRITTANY closes her eyes.)

BRITTANY

Ugh.

(The fog represents her constant head fog. If you don't know, now you know.)

However, since this is a scene written for the stage, we would not have the opportunity to see or read the stage directions. Our experience would be something like:

SCENE ONE

(Lights rise on BRITTANY, a young person in her late twenties. BRITTANY is sitting on a couch, legs extended, with a laptop perched on her lap. BRITTANY looks down at her right shin, checking if the cut from nine months ago has healed yet. It hasn't.)

BRITTANY

Still?

(She fidgets, often.)

BRITTANY

Ow.

(Long beat.)

BRITTANY

Oof. God, I'm tired.

(Long beat.)

BRITTANY

Mmm. Wait, what's that word?

(Beat. A fog rolls across the stage. BRITTANY closes her eyes.)

BRITTANY

Ugh.

That's it. That is the end of the scene.

Though I have studied and worked in theatre professionally over a decade—
Though I believe theatre is an art form that engages the body and embodied experiences deeply and richly, I did not and do not have the words to theatrically craft my own experiences of illness into dialogue. Because of this, my artist-self opened faerself up to other mediums and I found myself drawn towards poetry. This is no surprise as poetry is theatrical in its own right. Artist and academic Monica Prendergast (2009) writes, “[P]oetry is originally an oral art form deeply rooted in the sense of voice. Creating poetic inquiry is a performative act, revealing researcher/participants as both masked and unmasked, costumed and bared, liars and truth-tellers, actors and audience, offstage and onstage in the creation of research” (p. 547).

In seeking to create an “evocative representation” (Richardson, 2000, p. 913) of my inquiry into my embodied experiences as a queer, ill artist-researcher-teacher, I chose to engage in making and (re)making my understanding of myself (Brewer & Mohlke-Hill, Under review: Abstract accepted) on the page. Sparkes et al. (2003) consider how poetic representations have emerged as a qualitative research practice in the social sciences in the past several decades in order to cultivate a multitude of ways of understanding social worlds and our place within it. More specifically, the authors argue, “Since poetry embraces the notion of speech as an embodied activity, it can touch both the cognitive and the sensory in the reader and the listener. Therefore, poetic representations can touch us where we live, in our bodies. This gives it more of

a chance than realist tales to vicariously experience the self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation” (p. 155).

It is through my poetic inquiry that I am best able to investigate the many manifestations of knowledge constructed by my queer, fat, ill body. Poet Luisa A. Igloria (2019) echoes this purpose of poetic inquiry in the edited collection *Of Color: Poets Ways of Making, an anthology on transformative poetics*, writing, “There are things I do that I realize I hardly need to think consciously about anymore...What else was I taught, what else did I learn by taste or by feel and remember with my whole body?” (p. 17). Arts-based practices, like poetic inquiry, are innately inquiry-based and innately embodied, as they necessitate curiosity as well as practice attending to the present moment—a practice, Walsh, Bickel, and Leggo (2015) note, which challenges our habitual frameworks for “seeing, being, and becoming in the world, habits that narrow possibility, and undo potentiality” (p. 12). Writing poetry, inquiring into my body, queerness, illnesses, and embodied experiences as an artist-researcher-teacher, challenges me to not accept things at face value, but to investigate where my ideas, thoughts, theories, feelings, and sensations arise from.

The Process of Making and (Re)making a Poetics of Tendering

The body archive is an attunement, a hopeful gathering, an act of love against the foreclosures of reason. It is a way of knowing the body-self as a becoming and unbecoming thing, of scrambling time and matter, of turning toward rather than against oneself. And vitally, it is a way of thinking-feeling the body's unbounded relation to other bodies.”

-Juliette Singh

The majority of dissertations in the social sciences⁴ include sections on data collection and analysis. For me, engaging in research creation is and was an unraveling—the more I inquired into and reflected and wrote on bodies, embodiment, queerness, illness, and tendering, the more I came closer an understanding of my past-present-future selves being (un)expectedly and wondrously connected (Brewer & Mohlke-Hill, Under review: Abstract accepted). Digital Storyteller and educator Felicia Rose Chavez (2021) describes how teaching is overwhelmingly grounded in our inheritance, or our experience of how teaching is done, which, then, is a reinforcement how it's always been done—our present selves grounded in our past experiences

⁴ The field of teacher education is considered to be a social science, though I would argue it lives within the arts and humanities.

and designing our future experiences. I imagine, too, our inheritance is where our treatment of our own and other bodies is founded.

Consider your experiences as a student and/or teacher in education settings, from K-12 classrooms to school-sanctioned after school programs to local community programs. Which moments stick with you? What education spaces made you feel the most yourself? What was it about those spaces that scaffolded this groundedness, this ability to bring your whole self into the space? Did these resonant moments stop and end at your classroom's door? Or, was the door left cracked open, allowing other bits and bobs of your body to find their way back to you?

Perhaps, in the case of my own research creation and a poetics of tendering, we can name my data—these resonant bits and bobs of my embodied experiences as a queer, ill artist-researcher-teacher—resonant fragments, or resonant parts from a greater whole. When I write of resonance here, I draw on poet and academic Alecia Beymer and Scott Jarvie's definition.

Beymer and Jarvie (2020) write:

resonance is inherited perforations where little truths are collected and re-collected to take on the shape of revealing, seeing, and connecting. It is inherently relational. But it is also caught up in the assembling of many different things side by side (memories, affects, contradictions, reminders). It has to be associative, but we may never fully know, see, comprehend, or envision those associations. Something like the moment before you name things into existence. Something like the reverberations of a departed feeling. (p. 165)

Resonant fragments are a collage of memories and feelings living in our body. Resonant fragments are moments we feel and experience and decide, subconsciously or consciously, to collect and bring with our understanding of ourselves and the world. And, as writer and academic Juliette Singh (2018) describes, this collecting of resonant fragments, or body archiving, requires an intimate and, at times, discomfiting turning towards oneself. I began to collect resonant fragments from my first day as a doctoral student, writing intimately on connection during the early days of COVID-19 through playwriting (Brewer, 2023), and have continued to document resonant fragments during the entirety of my time as a doctoral student. Or, to be more accurate, during my time as a doctoral student, a professor, a medical patient, and a queer person living in the Midwest, among other roles, identities, and communities.

Often, when recognizing, naming, and reflecting on a resonant fragment, other fragments are found in its interstices, specifically related resonant fragments I was unable to name or

inquire into in the past. Consequently, reflecting on these additional resonant fragments became an expansive and integral component of inquiring into tendering the body. For example, in my poem, “When I storytell myself,” I write, “I want to say I came closer to knowing myself. I want to say I had grown more expansive, more queer, more pleasure-seeking than my midwest self could stand to contain. I want to say it’s easy, being back, that when I walk down these new smalltown streets in this different midwestern town, I feel safe. But still, I find it hard to breathe” (2022). Though a decade had passed, returning to the Midwest was an incredibly complicated experience for me. It was moments like this, these resonant fragments, where I realized, “I wanted to be entirely where I was, to notice actively rather than reflectively, to use my body to write and not just write about my body” (Brimhall, 2024). When I was in middle and high school, it was a place where it was unsafe to be queer and bi. Upon coming back, I was immediately subject to biphobia and bi erasure (Brewer, 2025a). At first, this caused me to pull more inward, to mask myself more. Eventually, as I reflected on this and other resonant fragments, it became a call to action: to consider adolescence and queerness alongside bodies, illness, teaching, and tendering.

Tendering [our] Futures

During the interview about Gay and Lawson’s collaboration, *The Tenderness Project*, Lawson reflects on a piece she wrote, “when she gets weary,” alongside a previous student of hers, Gabe Tomlin. Lawson shares of Tomlin:

who was a student of mine, who wrote about being ‘tender-headed,’ who was (and is) a being full of tenderness. He was still in high school in 2013 when I vividly remember him telling his fellow summer art camp students before they went on stage to perform: ‘Remember you are stars wrapped in flesh’ I couldn’t write about tenderness for this project without honoring this moment. I think I see tenderness all the time because I’m really invested in honoring our stories. (London, Gay, & Lawson, 2019).

Consider Tomlin’s affirmation, storied to us through his former teacher, Lawson: *remember you are stars wrapped in flesh*. Lawson describes this occurring in 2013, a resonant fragment that has clung tight to both her and Tomlin in the six years between 2013 and this interview in 2019. Acts of tendering become resonant fragments that stay with us, fragments of stardust becoming a part of our own flesh-wrapped star selves. Artists and teachers, both researchers in their own right,

are already clued in to what acts of tendering can look and feel like. I describe such an experience in my poem, “How do you put fanfare into a poem,” writing:

When I walked into the classroom, they were already enmeshed with one another like a zipper threaded tightly on a jacket. Did you all do this? I crooned. The answers assent and range in intensity. I had walked from one place still tuning, trying to locate my middle c but ringing flat, and suddenly it’s brassy and bold—I’m bold—I strut to literal applause across this runway scaffolded, zippered, by their hands. Bellows of recognition tune me true: I’m back at middle. (2025b)

Tendering is relational, it is stretching, it is holding forth and having grace for yourselves and others. *Tendering*, in the case of this dissertation, is an intentional offering of my own vulnerability as a methodological move. We cannot move through life with our bodies severed from our mind—the body remembers and will catch up with us. Tendering is a way of being we need to turn towards, urgently, in order to challenge this division. During a time where all people, but especially queer people, chronically ill and disabled people, and people of color are experiencing new waves of violence perpetrated against their bodies, their rights, and their bodily rights, tendering is one approach we can take to prioritizing care, caretaking, and connection both inside and outside of classrooms. I propose tendering as an integral framework for artist-researcher-teachers to take on in order to reaffix our bodies to our minds and remember or, perhaps, see for the first time that we are all *stars wrapped in flesh*.

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TENDERING [QUEER] ADOLESCENCE

Abecedarian for conjuring

A little, just a little

bit goes a long way

close your mouth and, in the meantime,

dream of something different, dream you are not here, dream your
entrails back into your binder of bones and flesh, that they weren't

fingered from the bowl of your body;

grasp tightly to your sanity, your sense of self and

hit them where it hurts—

ignore your pain, the vibrations of an organ container wrenched to bits & sticky-tacked back
together

just just just they say *put it behind you, it's not something to ruin your life over just just smile* its

killing you softly

like a hell-broth

boil and bubble

Macbeth's witches got that much right when they chose to

not take shit from anyone.

Consider, instead, how you could

organize the viscera propagating wildly inside you

prune what you must to liberate the lily of the valley from the crevices of your lumbar spine
quantity can be quality in the right company—allow yourself to be

ravished by the snapdragons germinating elastic the fibers your blood vessels

slurp up the fizz crackle of moss spackled across the gray-white matter of your brain

to be or not to be was never a question for you but an

unadulterated challenge tossed out by the self-proclaimed

virtuous, which you are not. Veer away from their diversions and towards the capillary

waves humming sticky in your esophagus, swelling bioluminescent,

xanthic light pulsing from the pulp of your molars—an auspicious audience for the

yarrow cresting at the gulf of your throat, a comber at its

zenith, breaking, its uprush conjuring you.

A Summer Day at Steak n 'Shake, Indiana, 2006

My brother won't like what you're doing, not one bit--- a phrase I've turned over, that has almost tumbled from my lips. Though I have no brother to call my own, the words wrap me with fizzy warmth, a kind of fleeting reassurance I've sought ever since he first rubbed his feet against mine at a restaurant with my best friend—his sister—sitting across from him. I wanted to walk away, outside the restaurant door, tear off my shoes and socks, hoping my brother would appear, ask what was wrong. Hoping he would tell him to *get your goddamn foot off* and her brother would apologize to mine, *sorry, man, I didn't know she was your sister*. Because having a brother would warrant me an apology. Would make real my desire for him to stop.

.

.

Instead I stay and order a frisco melt on sourdough bread. The rain drips down the diner windows, despairing in my stead. Rain is a trickster, Puck incarnate. It's supposed to promise rebirth but offers only oblivion, and he offers me his coat and I don't want it and I don't take it but his sister---my friend---says, *why not? He's being nice, he's never nice just take it*. And so I hold out my hand.

His coat is a slow suffocation on the way back to her house. To his house. Her home is not mine, nor is her brother, and all the protections a brother seems to afford. I like a home with a front door that groans to announce your arrival. I like a home where you can smell cooking and communing happens; it convinces me, just a little bit, it is safer. I watch her mother clean the final debris from dessert off the dishes, wayward drips fall from the faucet. I watch her father extinguish the lights, flicking the final switch. And, even as I watch his sister shuffle up the stairs, I see him linger behind and think, *all over the city there are brothers and sisters. Any one of them could be mine*.

MISSED CONNECTION:

To the fae girl I couldn't stop looking for

You: platinum pixie haircut; witchy dress with small purple & black flowers, lace accents, bell sleeves; shit-kickin' docs; twenty (or thirty?) something. Me: blue american eagle tee; flare jeans; waist length dirty blonde hair, straightened; leaning against my locker. I wasn't ready to see you. God, I wish I had been.

CHARACTER LIST, FIRST ENCOUNTERS IN ORDER OF OCCURRENCE

BRITTANY (as told by KINDERGARTEN TEACHER): really enjoys all of the materials in the art area. Brittany has been choosing not to participate in our large group time. She would rather work or socialize (which can be disruptive). We are working with Brittany to look at us when we are talking to her and to follow directions. Brittany enjoys writing! Brittany is a very independent worker. Brittany is well liked by her peers. She is a quick learner. We've enjoyed having Brittany in our class this year.

BRITTANY (as told by FIRST GRADE TEACHER): is a bright, enthusiastic learner! She is very helpful and dependable and shows good leadership skills. We have all enjoyed the interesting information she has shared with us during sharing. Her vocabulary, both oral and written, is extensive and growing every day! Her ability in math shows on a daily basis, and she encourages and assists other students when she can. I would like to see her work on projecting her voice louder and with a bit more expression. She has wonderful things to say and it would be great to see her volume increase. We will all miss her terribly when you move! Good luck!

BRITTANY (as told by SECOND GRADE TEACHER): has been adjusting well to our classroom. She seems to be doing satisfactory work in her academics in the short time that she has been at Olive Chapel. Brittany is a very bright, enthusiastic student. She is getting along well with the other students and is a willing helper. Brittany is making good progress in all subject areas. She is polite and cooperative. She is an enthusiastic learner. I have enjoyed having Brittany in my class.

BRITTANY (as told by THIRD GRADE TEACHER): has made an excellent adjustment to third grade and is showing good growth in all academic areas. Brittany however, can be talkative!! She is a wonderful addition to our class :) Brittany continues to perform well in everything she undertakes and is an enthusiastic worker. Well done! :) Brittany continues to make very good academic progress. She is an enthusiastic worker. Brittany has had an awesome quarter and is very well prepared for 4th grade! Congratulations. :)

BRITTANY (as told by ELEMENTARY GIFTED RESOURCE PROGRAM TEACHER): is very conscientious and responsible about all of her work. She is quick to grasp new concepts and participates well in class discussion.

BRITTANY (as told by FOURTH GRADE TEACHER): is a cooperative and respectful student. She gets along well with her classmates and observes all school and classroom rules.

Brittany uses her time wisely and stays on task. Brittany is a fine citizen. She is a role model to her classmates. Brittany continues to use her time wisely, stays on task, and completes all of her assignments. She is a hard worker and seeks help when needed. Brittany continues to be a fine citizen in the classroom and school setting. Brittany has done an excellent job of using her time wisely and completing all assignments. Her efforts are reflected in her outstanding progress. Brittany has been a joy to have in class. Brittany has displayed good effort in her work habits this marking period.

BRITTANY (as told by FIFTH GRADE TEACHER): None/ None/ None/ None/ None/
None/ None/ Outstanding!/ None

BRITTANY (as told by SIXTH GRADE TEACHERS): Pleasure to have in class!/ Keep practicing!/ Nice to have in class!/ S/ Outstanding Work, Brittany!/ Super Job!/ Nice to have in class! Keep up the good work!/ Nice effort; behavior could improve!/ Good effort & participation in class!/ Super Job!/ S/ None/ Very helpful in class/ Great! Outstanding Work, Brittany!/ Super Job!/ Outstanding Work, Brittany!/ Nice Work!/ Great!/ S/ S/ S/ S/ Outstanding Work, Brittany!/ S/ S/ S/ Great!/ Excellent participation in class!/ None/ S/ Keep practicing!/ S/ Great!/ Outstanding Work, Brittany!/ Enjoy your summer!/ S/ Enjoy your summer!/ S/ Enjoy your summer!

BRITTANY (as told by SEVENTH GRADE TEACHERS): Needs to have agenda signed once a week. Very helpful in class/ Great!/ Way to go! Great attitude!/ Good effort & participation in class!/ S/ Nice Work!/ Nice to have in class! Super Job!/ Late of missing work. Outstanding Work, Brittany!/ Great!/ Super Job! Pleasure to have in class!/ Needs to have agenda signed once a week. Pleasure to have in class!/ Great!/ Outstanding Work, Brittany! Pleasure to have in class!/ Super Job!/ S/ Good effort, Brittany./ Nice to have in class! Excellent artwork!/ Outstanding Work, Brittany!/ Pleasure to have in class!/ Nice to have in class! Talkative at times!/ Work extra hard during this last grading period./ Great!/ Fantastic! I appreciate your effort!/ Good effort & participation in class!/ Super Job!/ Nice Work!/ None/ Super Job!/ Outstanding Work, Brittany!/ Pleasure to have in class! Low Test or Quiz Scores/ Way to go!/ Pleasure to have in class! ALWAYS do your best!/ Outstanding Work, Brittany! Good Luck Next Year!/ Nice to have in-class! Good effort, Brittany./ Good Luck Next Year! Enjoy your summer!/ Good effort & participation in class!/ Enjoy your summer!/ None/

Fantastic!/ Outstanding Work, Brittany!/ Pleasure to have in class!/ Super Job! Nice to have in class!

BRITTANY (as told by EIGHTH GRADE TEACHERS): S/ S/ Great attitude!/ I appreciate your effort!/ Great Start!/ S/ Nice Work!/ Great!/ Nice Work!/ S/ S/ S/ Great attitude!/ Excellent participation in class!/ S/ Pleasure to have in class!/ S/ Semester grade affected by exam. Nice Work!/ Nice Work!/ Nice Work!/ S/ S/ S/ Nice to have in class!/ Nice work!/ Nice to have in class!/ None/ Nice Work!/ Way to go!/ Nice Work!/ S/ Good Luck Next Year!/ Good player in band class!/ Good Luck Next Year!/ Good luck at BHS!/ Good Luck Next Year!/ None/ Nice Work! Enjoy your summer!/ Enjoy your high school years!/ S

BRITTANY (as told by NINTH GRADE TEACHERS): None/ None/ None/ None/ None/
None/ None/ Effort-Superior/Good example for others./ None/ None/ None/ Good example for
others/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ Effort - Superior/ Good example for
others/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ Effort - Superior/ Good example for
others/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None

BRITTANY (as told by TENTH GRADE TEACHERS): None/ None/ None/ None/ None/
None/ Impressive writing ability! Nice job, Brittany!/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/
None/ None/ None/ Impressive writing ability! Nice job, Brittany!/ None/ None/ None/ None/
None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ Effort -
Superior/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None

BRITTANY (as told by ELEVENTH GRADE TEACHERS): None/ None/ None/ None/
None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/
None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/
None/ grade reflects extra credit/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None

BRITTANY (as told by TWELFTH GRADE TEACHERS): None/ None/ None/ None/
None/ None/ None/ None/ None/None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/
None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/ None/

Key

/ - introduces a new teacher voice

S - Satisfactory

The girls I grew up with were slick

after Karyna McGlynn

& sweet as Splenda, saccharine, *four packets please*,
they soak you sickly until you forget it's bad for you

They had skin like frogs, elastic & moist, shedding
their bodies every weekend, not afraid to mislead you,
to try on another & another, catwalking brazenly
through the aisles of the Goodwill off of State Road 46.
They steered me down the highway of adolescence.

Converse & Matching Shirts & *We aren't talking to them
today*. They stepped down the halls silently & not without
pride, claiming the senior hallway every morning at 7:05
with a slouch like the high school itself was propping them up.

Their eyes glinted when they tossed quips, no hands needed,
instead fisting mickey d's frosties & fries from Arby's & when
one got get, banter dripping like Arby's sauce from the corner
of another's mouth, you could sometimes see their eyes strike flint.

They all took up late-night messaging, keeping watch for alerts
of alt lyrics & door creaks & rotating besties [pre/de]moted
on the daily. They had MySpace Top 8 & Bath & Body
Works sweet pea spray & intentions to be teachers & nurses.

Absent-mindedly, their tongues sliced at my folds, making pulp
of me. I was a blank page for them to write their stories on,
shoved into the corner of their backpack, tossed in their car.

I contorted myself into the little space remaining in their
Toyota Camry. I was eager & pliant & flexible & quiet.

& they didn't hear me—when the weight got to be too much
& they bore down too hard. They didn't listen for me at all.

Even though I'd learned all their favorite things & practiced
their subdued smile, the one that doesn't reach the eyes.

When I storytell myself

I want to say the Midwest does not live in my body—instead I share I was pulled from state to state five times before I was twelve. I share the first choice that was mine was to leave, to move to a city over ten times the population of smalltown, Indiana, known as home to the company that supplied Michael Jackson's casket and—unironically teenage—we declared the town slogan should be, "Everyone is dying to live here." From twelve to twenty-one I was saturated in a Midwest state of mind, I felt heavy, uncertain. The only thing I knew for sure was I wanted to inhabit a space bigger than me, where there were so many people moving and being that I could disappear, could slip out of the strange skin I had donned by default and slide into another, experimenting in and out and around bodies in order to find my own footing. I did this urgently. I scrambled to subsume myself in order to seek some kind of clarity, running from 6,000 towards 80,000 towards 178,000 towards 1.8 million in search of the safety promised by different bodies, by more bodies. And each time, I want to say I came closer to knowing myself. I want to say I had grown more expansive, more queer, more pleasure-seeking than my Midwest self could stand to contain. I want to say it's easy, being back, that when I walk down these new smalltown streets in this different Midwestern town, I feel safe. But still, I find it hard to breathe; the Midwest clings to me like a forgotten favorite sweater—one I lived in then but the fabric chafes against my skin now— somehow still smoke-soaked from almost decades distant nights of communion, of bonfires in the boonies, of boy-girl pair-offs. The smoke lives in my body...I can taste it, the pinewood tendrils curling eternally around my tongue, permeating my lungs, my cells. I inhale deeply and close my eyes. Nestled in the blackness in my periphery, little firecrackers languish too close by.

The first time

I could love girls out loud, long-hug,
head to toe, body-sighs as we slip slide
retreat into each other's shoulder nook
after a long day—was in college, our house

sheltered 120 women. Here, we slept together
in a large room, lights dark, to the soundtrack
of shared breath from bodies above and side
to side, we sign-up to wake each other every

morning, fingers gently pressing on another's
shoulder, whispering into her ear, *It s time
to get up and you don t want to be late.*
We hold hands, we cuddle, we sneak-borrow

each others 'clothes, swapping pheromones
like perfume and burrowing into other girls 'laps
our skin electric, bodies charged, we power
one another. We take up space 3-4-5-6-7

to a room modpodging its bones to buttress us. None
of the friends I found my way to after were in a sorority—
almost all of them queer, their bodies versed me in touch
as *yes touch as you are dear to me touch as I am here for you,*

and they traded touch vigorously, speaking care
without limits in the city of Philadelphia,
of brotherly love, of fraternity. When I set my sights
on state school, running hard and fast from Indiana

smalltown living, I knew I wanted to rush, to submerge
myself in the ambrosia of sisterhood. Sorority girls,
we had permission to touch, too, to love differently, to penetrate
the restraints tethered to each woman at birth, remake ourselves

with ribbon with glitter and glue and gaudiness, with garish colors
so showy so vibrant we split ears, you can't help but hear us.
This is ours. This we have devoutly crafted, painting each other
with powder like ardor, pouring into her cup, never letting it empty.

Bi Premonitions

It wasn't a surge of cold water awakening my senses
or a radio station suddenly absolved of static.

It crept.

It crept like my hands on her zipper
like my dial-up computer loading FictionPress
like my interest in arriving at clarity, perhaps.

Perhaps it could have surged instead
but, to me, time was a sieve, strained
and I couldn't afford to look
her in the eyes just yet

Ode to Maureen

for Maureen from RENT the musical

She pulses neon lavender, cold tang
bursts from my teeth, stirs some me I see,
I want, wrapped tight with poise, their sour harangues
slosh across her leather armor weakly.
Her performance is not a performance,
is not a phase but instead a molting—
she's not a slut, she has no shame, her stance:
take me for what I am, brash, revolting,
she sings, a siren who knows what she wants.
The only thing to do is jump over
the moon, and so she jumps and bears the brunt
of our judgment, the disdain we show her.
My friends cast me as Maureen in our sing-
along, maybe they tasted my yearning.

Arriving early means getting to watch the older girls

I have a dancing dream
hazy in the distance
one two three taps
toes feet slap

across the floor, I remember
rhythm, the beats, the hot hot hot
tunes as a cassette crackles,
a jarring click, rehearsal over,
sweat droplets all that remain
on the linoleum floor, our softer,
lighter, less practiced steps take
over, bodies sway, fingers grip
rainbow scarves, a colorful
spectrum of taffeta trembles,
fills the space their curves left
behind, I remember, yearn—

but all I have are others 'words oxidized
hung out to dry in the dark, echoes of
my own pleasure, not unlike the scarves
swishing in the heat of what came before

Skintimate

from the Latin word intimate, *to impress*
or to *make familiar* and I cover my legs
in pink-red soft serve, stroking its sweetness
into my skin like prayer—that's what everyone
around our town does at least, prays. I thought
I would give it a try. *Can you hear me, God?*
I just want to slather myself until I am only
foam, to sense-drench myself—

some boy in school asks what I look like
down there, asks about landing strips and
postage stamps, Brazilians, the Hollywood,
asks how often I bring my fingers to touch
the most sensitive knob of skin on my body.
If I were you, I would touch myself all over,
all the time. His friend laughs. *Give me some*
skin. My friend is chastised because her fingers

stroke the skin below her skirt when she stands
for her speech. My friend is sent to the office
for spaghetti straps, for a tube top, for a cowl
neck, for a bra strap sighing its way to visible
from beneath a perfectly viable shirt. We slouch,
our hands tunnel into our hoodies, we know each
others 'bodies better than our own from hugs
goodbye and hand-holding, from pimple-popping
and heads resting on shoulder on shoulder

on shoulder. Intimate, from the Latin intimus, *inmost*,
and what tension exists between letters: *deepest*
within or *farthest from the outside*, and that's where
they burrow with every word they've ever said.
At first, I only used an electric razor, not wanting
to cut deep, past my facade, the illusion of that silky
brand of middle school chill—it wasn't enough.
My best friend's legs, licked clean by one, two,
three, four, five tongues metallic, glisten in a girl-
guttured kind of way and I wondered, *being gutted*,
is that what it takes to be skin-loved?

Family-portrait as a papasan chair

in the corner
she waits
to swaddle you

forty-some
years and counting
cradling

generations
of crones—
striking

and clever
as iron, flint—
she creaks

her crevices
splintering
five nails

herniated
her joints
the weight

grating and shaving
away pieces
she folds

into herself
still
reaching

her wicker
branches
welcoming

New England Secrets

I walk into the barn, a solitary space suspended in time; *it could have been featured in a b-level horror film if it had any sort of structural integrity*, I muse to myself. It almost feels like a joke I have trekked all this way to chase this spectre: a story I heard once, a barn I never visited and wasn't certain still existed, and I am here all just to chase a ghost, my mother's ghost, the one my mother told me about seeing one time when she was twelve and limber and bloated with possibility—possibility now punctured. All I have is textures of a tale: my mom's fulfillment after finishing a long day's work, the magic of the minutes after midnight, of finding friendship in unexpected places, and a sudden, sharp sound accompanied by a sulfury smell like when fire first ignites. I remember this ghost occupied my mom's belly, the hearth of her spirit, and each time my mom uttered the tale, an ethereal mist crept from her lips, chapping them as it passed through, and lit stars in my mom's eyes. This was the intimate possibility of connection. All I want is to hold a piece of my mother inside me like my mother housed that ghost and to know things will somehow end up okay and magic might be real and the inexplicable and unfathomable are tangible futures you can hope for. As the minutes edge past midnight, there is a sharp pop, a glistening something seeping in from the rafters, and in this moment I think, *maybe we are connected, maybe we are all made from all the same pieces and parts as our mothers and hold the potential to contain an extraordinary secret.*

I can't remember the photo

I only recall it was of my best friend and I and I loved her. This photo was lembas bread: golden-warm, satiating. I was full, stuffed, gorged on love. And I wanted everyone to experience it, to nibble on the bits of honeyed life flecked throughout, to steep their gut in this love. This photo was my A+ paper stuck to the fridge. A voice over my shoulder, *you should change that picture*. I didn't know she was there. *You look like lesbians*. I turned my gaze back to the photo, the edges of the elven bread burning before my eyes, the smell wafting uncomfortably hot. I breathed in sharp—charcoal lined my nose, pricked my eyes. We weren't holding hands. We weren't in each other's laps. Our faces were close together, two eggs over easy, sunlight crisping at the center of our eyes. I wonder, now, if when she tasted the bread, she couldn't focus on the sweetness but on the bits of lavender flower in her teeth. I changed the photo.

Spring Break

she almost didn't come she hadn't been speaking to me again I was devastated again and embarrassed *how would I explain this to my parents? oh, God* but a few days before spring break she did she forgave me for what I don't know something here or there I'm sure I don't know I'm sure what I do know is relief palpable dewy like splattered cinnamon reheating my heart nose teeth tongue first but don't inhale too deeply get too settled too at ease women are often compared to birds which I've always hated and I am a cardinal quavering she is looking at me my red feathers cutting her teeth on each teary tendril my crest my crown fragile not fletchings but raised my bill opens I beak I mean my mouth opens rips apart hope cracks open trying flattened twitterpated

Towards softness

When I follow the line of follicles from my ankle down across my foot I feel warm. I hope it looks like fur. I hope in the summer when I strut in sandals, my thick strapped docs, that my little brown hairs thrive, that they sprout through and trail up and around and across my feet freely not unlike the distinct pleasure derived from friday nights in eighth grade, which includes hot tubs and slick secrets and cool cans of mountain dew—your friend crack-snaps one open and the moment shutters itself into some body-crevice where you tuck memories. You hide/hug this unexpected moment as he gets in close, like the words that slipped from his tongue as they traced their way down the warm brown fuzz of your, what, *happy trail*, he named haughtily, *nice*. Two days ago I stopped clearing the bristles of hair near and below my navel; now, they emerge unevenly and without care, unsmiling, tangled, taking the terrain anew and marking a growing season all their own. They are not soft but, nevertheless, they caress the curves of my stomach sensually, soothing the burning bumps that pervaded my skin prior, and claiming its own.

Dressing the part: Queerness and the Body in Adolescence and Teacher Education

A neon orange backpack rested near their feet. I had no idea how some people could wear their personality so effortlessly. I had regular panic attacks deciding if I could pull off gold hoops.

-Haley Jakobson, Old Enough

Someone just came in the door/ Like no one I ever saw before/ I feel/ I feel.../ Your swagger and your bearing/ And the just right clothes you're wearing/ Your short hair and your dungarees/ And your lace up boots/ And your keys, oh/ Your ring of keys/ I thought it was s'pposed to be wrong/ But you seem okay with being strong/ I want...to.../ You're so.../ It's probably conceited to say/ But I think we're alike in a certain way.../ Do you feel my heart saying "hi"? "

-Small Alison, "Ring of Keys", Fun Home

On Wednesdays, we wear pink."

- Mean Girls

(A young teen is seen onstage pouring over her clothing. Several shirts have been tossed across the room, on the bed, on a standing mirror, near the desk. A pair of jeans hangs haphazardly across the back of the desk chair.)

YOUNG TEEN

Nothing is right!

I don't have *anything* to wear!

DAD

(Shouts from offstage) Sydney, honey, the bus will be here in eight minutes. You don't want to be late/ on your first day.

SYDNEY

(Hollers) /I know, Dad. I'm hurrying. I just need the right shirt.

DAD

Okay, okay!

You know, honey, no one is going to remember what you wore today in a week—

SYDNEY

(Shouting) That's not the point!

(To self) Ugh, like he'd get it.

God, I'm fucked. It'd be better if I didn't go.

—

This is a caricature of a scene many of us have seen played out in movies, tv shows, and books several dozen times. There is a clear metaphor: *who am I going to be today? Who am I*

deciding to be this year? How does that person present themselves? How do they dress? As a teen and young adult, my body belonged more to others than myself. In her collection of essays *Girlhood*, Melissa Febos (2021) describes this phenomenon in dialogue with Fuchs, writing, “The self becomes a collaboration with other people, a series of fantasies that lead to “the armour of an alienating identity.” It is a cliché that adolescents care too much what their peers think, more sobering to think of the power we give to others at that age. Not Like me, but Conjure me” (pp. 52-53). Febos goes on to cite Fuchs, to share how Fuchs describes the gaze of others as capable of redefining the *lived-body*, and to emphasize Fuch’s notion of the gazed-upon-body becoming a *body-for-others*—an object or thing. The suit of armor serves as a metaphor for our interactions with others and how each interaction becomes a part of the costume we wear to greet each day. Soon, the whole self is obscured. In an ideal world, adolescence is a time when young people can begin to explore and understand the many different parts of their identities.

One of my biggest fears as a young person was wrapped up in identity: what if the people and communities we love, or the cultures we are immersed in, do not love or support our identities? I didn’t have queer teachers I saw myself reflected in, nor did our curriculum in the small, midwestern town where I endured my middle school and high school years feature queer characters. What would it have been like if the texts for my high school English classes featured queer characters as protagonists? Or, what would it have been like if my teachers had intentionally made space for discussing what was missing in our classroom texts? Adolescence is a very particular stage of each of our lives—it is an intense crash course in ‘becoming’. Some lean into this period of exploration, others pack themselves away, and too many, still, don’t have the privilege of time, opportunity, and safety to intentionally do so. Klein and Taylor (2023) write, “We were both struck with what school taught us about ourselves and our worth that had nothing to do with curriculum or content...Not your actual value as a human being..., but your social worth, an arbitrary appraisal by others that’s inherently flawed and yet hard to shake, even in adulthood” (p. 212). Throughout my adolescence (and still now, sometimes, but less often), I would pack away certain aspects of myself, dismiss and discount certain identities, if they did not fit into or match the relationships I was a part of.

(Lights up on BRITTANY in the 2010, a white American person in faer early thirties, who is staring at the open closet in front of her. Clothing is arranged in

what appears to be rainbow-order—red, yellow, green, blue, indigo violet—followed by brown, black, and white. BRITTANY alternates between thumbing through the clothing and stepping back to take it all in.)

BRITTANY

What to wear tomorrow...

Hmm.

I want something comfortable, definitely. We will be playing *group juggle* as a warm-up.

Something I can move in easily—I want to be able to crouch, to rest on my knees, to be able to look my students in their eyes as I talk to them when they're working at their desks.

But, also, I want to wear something fun.

For them, sure, but also

for me. I want to feel joy when I see the fabric. First day, full joy.

Because, what is *cool* after all? *Cool* is when you feel totally good and comfortable in who you are and what you're rocking. That's what I think it is anyway.

Okay, okay, I'm thinking...loose, flowy pants, maybe my elephant pants? My bold, blurple, flowy top. Then, my Tibetan black quartz pendant and my nine or so rings...and voila! We got a first day of school—of teaching this group of kids, anyway—outfit.

Oh, and shoes, of course. I'll grab my docs on the way out.

Recently, my friend, Jeanetta, and I were collaborating on a chapter titled, “(Re)making grief: Co-quilting queer, crip-meditations on embodied collective care”. In this specific chapter, our third collaboration together, we shared our desire to (re)make joy and pleasure with all dimensions of ourselves—past/present/future—in order to alleviate the weight of suffering we have experienced in recent years. We connected several years prior over our shared love of artmaking and craft and, then, connected differently and deeply over our shared experiences with various chronic illnesses. Undertaking collaborative creative research with Jeanetta not only reinforced our understanding of artmaking as a form of literacy, but also gave us permission to reevaluate what we value in our own research processes. We found our artistic journey of co-quilting to be grounded in inquiry, rich with story, filled with intentional care, inherently relational, and slow in the best of ways. As we unpacked (in my case, quite literally, unpacking clothes from various stored boxes) our relationships with specific clothing and pieces of fabric, we found ourselves immersed in stories. For Jeanetta, these stories centered around family. For me, these stories centered around my relationship to clothing. Both of our stories featured threads related to chronic illness and queerness.

As a part of our work for our chapter on (re)making grief, I repurposed pieces of clothing from middle school, high school, college, and after into several collage quilt squares. Joan Jacobs

Brumberg, author of *The body project: An intimate history of American girls*, speaks to how the body is its own all-encompassing project, a canvas on which to collage who you are and who you want to be. She writes, “Because the body is a proxy for the self, selecting clothes for it is always of vital concern” (1997, p. 149). As a secondary student, I didn’t gravitate towards wearing clothes that felt joyful, but prioritized clothes that fit into the general aesthetic and vibe of my peers. My biggest goal was to attract very little extraneous attention. In our chapter, I detail how, on reflection, I realized many of the activities I was involved in —marching band, concert band, drama club, show choir, concert, soccer, cross country, track and field— were all activities that required their own costumes. Despite this or, perhaps, because of this, I found myself more at home in those spaces existing in my body than I did in other parts of the school.

(It s 2017. Lights up on BRITTANY, who, here, is in faer mid-twenties. She is helping Mae, faer boss who is in their late thirties, with setting up a classroom space for the annual teaching artist⁵ orientation for the theatre education nonprofit they both work for. Soon, artists new to their education organization will be trickling in. Tables are arranged in a medium-sized semi circle. There is soft music playing, giving the vibes of entering a yoga studio. A variety of fidgets are scattered across the table surfaces. There are also an array of snacks, coloring book pages, colored pencils, pens, loose notebook paper, and orientation packets set up on a table near the entrance to this classroom, as well as a sign in sheet. A colorful Google slides presentation is projected across from the semicircles of tables. BRITTANY and MAE are tearing off and putting up large post-it super sticky easel pad pages on the classroom walls. They are mid-conversation.)

MAE

Yes, exactly, some of the questions we get every time.

BRITTANY

I really love our classroom teacher profiles⁶. Writing my teacher profile for this year’s discussion was so cathartic.

MAE

I bet. What a time that was, having to involve both the vice principal and principal. Oof.

⁵ What is a teaching artist? A teaching artist is first and foremost an artist who brings their expertise into classroom spaces often alongside nonprofit organizations, from museums and arts centers to theatres and arts education nonprofits. In our case, our teaching artists were theatre professionals ranging from actors and directors to playwrights and designers.

⁶ Names are fictionalized and schools are unnamed in these composite teacher character descriptions.

BRITTANY

That was rough. But it makes for a great discussion for new teaching artists: how would we navigate each of these different classroom teacher partnerships as teaching artists?

MAE

I love it. Other than working with students, being in dialogue with our TAs and artists, thinking about how we can do better, it's one of my favorite parts of what we do.

(Pause — a comfortable one, though. Both MAE and BRITTANY are contentedly continuing to set up the space.)

MAE

Oh, you know what question we get each time??

BRITTANY

What?

MAE

Clothes.

BRITTANY

Yes! What to wear. That's a good one.

MAE

Especially when you're new to teaching artistry. So many folks are worried about looking professional enough, which I get.

BRITTANY

What is professionalism, really?

MAE

Tell me about it.

BRITTANY

But, for real. I remember when I came in for teaching artist orientation a few years ago. That question came up, of course, and y'all's answer just struck me. It's stuck with me ever since.

MAE

Right?

BRITTANY

Wear something school appropriate, of course, but other than this please feel welcome to show up authentically as yourself. How you dress, how you talk with your students, how you interact with them is modeling a specific way of being an adult that your students might not have known was an option before.

(Beat.)

It's wild how revolutionary it can be, just being allowed to be yourself.

Fashion has definitely helped to define my pleasure activism. When my father passed away over a year ago I felt a grief I've never had before. After two months of being in a catatonic state, I began craving laughter and joy. I decided to wear the one thing that gives visual pleasure instantly no matter who is wearing it, sequins. I wore sequins every single day for about a month. Although my energy was low, my sequin jackets would make someone giggle, and then they would send me that good energy, which would soothe my wounds. It was, and still is, the best healing therapy I've experimented with. I continue to wear sequined jackets, now paired with heart-shaped red glasses, in hopes to generate more love and joy in my life and others."

- Ingrid, Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good

As a middle school and high school student living in Small Town, Indiana, I did not wonder if out, queer people my age existed, if there were queer teachers, what a bi+ (Ochs, 2021) person—if this identity was even real and valid—would dress like, how they might adorn themselves in pursuit of knowing themselves better, in pursuit of joy. They didn't exist. Jen Winston, author of *Greedy: Notes from a Bisexual who Wants Too Much*, writes:

Growing up in southern Indiana, I felt that lack firsthand—amid the cornfields, I found no queer community, no sexually fluid role models, and no context for the term "bisexual" (though I knew it had the word "sex" in it, which meant I couldn't ask an adult). In middle school, I swooned over a boy on my swim team but got butterflies around a girl who rode my bus. Yet even at twelve, I knew life would be easier if I squished down the gay stuff and pretended to be straight. (2021, p. 6)

My feelings did not exist in isolation, but I didn't know that. Others weren't [able to be] visible. I had yet to know the vibrancy, the colorful plumage, of people who hold nonbinary identities.

Though I was a voracious reader growing up, it was only in the last five years I have been able to find and read a number of books with named, bi+ characters and/or content. On reflection, some of my favorite characters, characters I was drawn to (like Maureen from RENT), were bi+---however, these identities were never named and unnamed bi+ characters were almost

always portrayed as sluts, bad romantic partners, and/or liars. Teacher educators and teachers know firsthand the importance of our young people having access to many mirrors and windows (Ellis et al., 2021). If I had the opportunity to access a multiplicity of bi+ peers and/or adults, characters in media, and/or characters in books, I am confident it would have changed my life. As Melissa Febos writes in her collection *Girlhood: Essays*, “I hadn’t known that women like her existed, that her kind of beautiful was an option...I have since learned that recognizing the invisible parts of oneself in another person can feel like a radiant kind of love. It can make those parts stronger inside you” (2021, p. 89). It is integral that our young people have the opportunity to inquire into and explore the identities they hold. It is integral that teachers and teacher educators have the opportunity to do the same, so they can scaffold and facilitate identity exploration for their students. It is integral that queer youth have the opportunity to peruse a rich and diverse representation of bi+ characters.

(It is the fall of 2020. BRITTANY is going on a masked walk in faer neighborhood while on a Zoom audio call with two new cis-straight friends in faer PhD cohort. BRITTANY is a little anxious, chatting with relatively new friends, but hopes to push through—and the walk helps get some of this nervous energy out. BRITTANY is thinking about saying the right thing, about not saying the wrong thing, about saying an interesting thing—)

ANNA⁷

It’s just, I wish there were more interesting people in our cohort. There were so many gay folks back in Minneapolis. Or, at least, some colorful hair or something. How are there so many straight, married people with kids?

(Beat.)

No offense, Brittany.

⁷ This name has been changed.

(Ick shivers its way down BRITTANY's spine. BRITTANY is thinking that she is not straight. BRITTANY is thinking that fae doesn't have kids. BRITTANY is thinking and thinking and thinking. BRITTANY says nothing.)

Identity exploration is not a finite process. We owe ourselves—and our students—time, space, and slowness to inquire into what feels good and true for each of us. For me, my exploration truly began after I graduated from Indiana University with my undergraduate degrees and, over the course of the next several years, moved to two large cities: first, Providence, RI, where the population is a little under 200,000 people and, then, to Philadelphia, PA, the sixth largest city in the United States with a population of about 1.5 million people. Walking the streets of both cities⁸ accounts for hundreds of hours of my life; they are hours I would not trade for anything. It was one of the first times, en masse, where I walked and witnessed person after person after person who did not look or dress or behave like the person before them. Who I am, who I could be, held more possibilities than I had ever realized.

When I moved to Providence, RI for graduate school and, then, Philadelphia, PA for work, I felt a spaciousness I had not experienced before. These cities were large enough to contain multitudes. Finally, I could slow down enough to where I might be able to catch a glimpse of who I am in her eyes, in their tattoos, in his laugh, in their gait, in her turn of phrase. I did not meet a bi+ person until I had lived in Philadelphia for several years, but, despite this, I finally felt like I had enough room to exhale, to begin removing a plate or two of the heavy armor I had accumulated over the past two decades and change, and to experiment. Of identity, Ghoddy Muhammad, author of *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, writes:

Identity is composed of notions of who we are, who others say we are (in both positive and negative ways), and whom we desire to be. I believe there is a complex and dynamic dance among the three toward identity development for both children and adults throughout our lives. Identity is dynamic and changing. Our identities (both cultural identities and others) are continually being (re)defined and revised while we reconsider

⁸ Bless cities for their walkability and decent public transportation.

who we are within our sociocultural and sociopolitical environment. Identity is fluid, multilayered, and relational, and is also shaped by the social and cultural environment as well as by literacy practices” (p. 67).

For me, this inquiry into myself started where the obfuscation once started: with fashion. It started with curating and adorning myself in ways that brought me fiery joy. I rocked a platinum pixie cut, rich lip colors, and playful jewelry. I decorated each finger with a ring, sometimes two. I wore whimsical, flowy dresses almost every day to work, dresses that felt femme in a renaissance-bard kind of way. These artifacts of my blossoming identities were collected over minutes and hours and years. When I looked in the mirror, I felt like I was truly starting to see pieces and parts of myself. Flash forward about five years after the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic: I could no longer wear these clothes. I could no longer wear my rings. I have been navigating several chronic illnesses since 2021 and one of them had caused significant weight gain. I could no longer wear these clothes. I could no longer wear these clothes. I can no longer wear these clothes. In what felt like an impossibly brief moment where I was able to embrace my queer identity outwardly, I had collected several new identity layers: fat, chronically ill⁹.

I wasn't wrong about beginning to shed my armor piece by piece in my mid-20s—I did shed a few small components and I found incredible amounts of joy in costuming my body, in decorating myself with heartfelt tattoos, in taking myself out for long walks in order to try myself on. In Philadelphia, almost all of my community—both professional and personal—were queer. But, when I returned to the Midwest, wearing these new pieces of me felt jarring. Because then, the claustrophobia hit. Because then, I met face to face with many reasons why I held onto my armor, despite it being 2020 and not 2004. Queer folks are fewer and farther between. In the department where I study and work, a department with over 50 faculty members and 100 Ph.D. students, maybe a handful of folks are queer. Maybe. It seems to be an aspect of self that is still not spoken of by many. This same department, the number one of its kind in the world according to U.S. News & World Report, offers no courses on LGBTQ+ studies in education and/or queering pedagogy. In contrast, about one-third of the students I taught—pre-service teachers—openly identified as queer. Where are their mirrors? Where can they see themselves in the classroom? What are they learning about their own identities as they observe their professors? I

⁹ I would like to note that neither of these terms are 'bad 'terms but are simply descriptors.

hope, almost twenty years later, they aren't accumulating armor like mine. It was then, I realized, I needed to start again, to start to rebuild myself piece by piece in the place where my heavy armor was originally forged. Because, I want more than anything for my students to feel secure in who they are and might be, and, in order for that to be possible, I needed to find a whole new kind of comfort and strength in my own identities. Furthermore, it called for more space and curiosity and slowness to discuss identity explicitly.

When I am working with and reflecting alongside my pre-service teachers, I describe the experience of adolescence as “feeling in technicolor”. As an artist and educator who both works closely with adolescents and teachers who teach adolescents, I know firsthand the importance of scaffolding space for students’ self-inquiry: to try on different identities—different selves—and to find which pieces and parts feel best. Many educators identify artmaking as an ideal lens to engage *becoming* and self-reflection (Barajas-López & Bang, 2018; de los Rios, 2016; Flores, 2020; Halverson, 2021; Milburn, 2021; Winn, 2011). Theatre artist Erica Halverson emphasizes identity should not be understood as a product but, rather, a process and that the process of artmaking is a well-fitted scaffold for the process of trying on different identities (2021, p. 60). Gloria Anzaldúa, poet, writer, and feminist theorist, writes, “Identity, as consciously and unconsciously created, is always in process—self interacting with different communities and worlds” (2015, p. 70). As we move through our lives, we encounter different places, people, and events, all of which have the opportunity to impact our understanding of ourselves. As an educator, I firmly believe in the importance of continuing to investigate our shifting identities throughout our lives, as well as how these identities impact our reading of the world.

In Fall of 2022, I designed and taught an undergraduate English course, “Critical Literacies and Communities,” a required course for pre-service English teachers. How can we understand how people make meaning, or engage in literacy practices, both individually and as communities without understanding identity as a key framework? During the beginning of the semester, we focused on defining identity; defining literacy; and bridging identity and literacy. In designing this course, I firmly believed several classes—ideally several weeks—needed to be dedicated to understanding and unpacking identity as a concept, as well as the identities we each hold. As we delved into investigating and defining the concept of literacy, we read excerpts from Halverson (2021), Muhammad (2020), Winn (2011), Flores (2020), and Anzaldúa (2015), among others. It was in designing this course I first found myself struggling to identify academic texts

relevant to teachers and teacher educators that defined identity not as static, but as dynamic, emphasized the necessity of continuing to inquire into the identities we hold throughout our lives, and named identity as a framework we employ as we engage the world. Moments like this contributed to my need to delve more deeply into identity in my creative research as an artist and educator.

[T]ake for instance the way I related to my own body for the majority of my life, how it was determined by the rules I was given for how it should look. I spent years monitoring and punishing my own body for being something it was not supposed to be. One of the ways that I undid that conditioning was by habituating myself to other ways of thinking”

-Melissa Febos, Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative

Now, as a thirty-something year old person, I actively make the choice to live my queer and bi+ identities outwardly. Intentionally choosing to embrace these identities each day has been a complicated, messy decision, especially at first. Why am I doing this risk-taking, especially being back in the Midwest, a place where queerness was particularly taboo in the 00s, a place where I struggled deeply with my own identities? I am doing this risk-taking to be seen, as an embodied form of activism—how I look and how I am is a legitimate way to exist as a “professional person”--- and, in this way, also for my students. For my middle and high school students in Providence, Rhode Island; in Philadelphia, PA; and, now, my undergraduate and graduate students in East Lansing, Michigan.

However, though I firmly believe in the importance of this kind of embodied activism, honoring my queer, bi+ identity extends beyond embodied expressions of gender and identity—it also informs my pedagogical practices, specifically the importance of scaffolding love and care into education spaces—which I speak to in greater detail in my essay, “Tendering the Classroom: Illness, the Body, and Teaching” (Brewer, 2025)—a practice which is not abided in “traditional” classroom spaces, or those that practice banking models of education (Freire, 2018), where teachers have all of the important, expert knowledge and students have it imparted to them bit by bit. Furthermore, as educators, embracing our own exploration of our identities both models comfortability with who we are, with inquiry, with the unknown, and with who we may become—this offers students a unique kind of permission to do so themselves.

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MAKING, REMAKING, & TENDERING RELATIONSHIPS

The store is closed now

there is a soft sensation
a stinging-numb-tingling
encircling my thumb
the phantom pulsations
reminding me to take off
my ring at night, to never
wear it too long, though
I never used to take it off—

I remember my mom lost
hers in the ocean several
years back, how crushed
and naked she felt missing
this circlet we delighted in
choosing out together
in an airport jewelry store,
one of the moments of mother-
daughterness where every
thing falls into place

—but last week I took it off, or
maybe it was the week before,
it became easier to leave
the band off than to coerce it over
my knuckle, to force it across
this newfound bloated barrier.
At least, that is what I whispered
to myself, what I repeated like
a spell when I tried to join her
back to me.

Nostalgia Packed Tight

I splice open boxes in firm, intentional strokes, one after another, using the boxcutter my dad left behind. The rhythmic cracking and thwacking create an almost soothing meditation until I cut open the first box of books from a load my parents dropped off a week earlier—a pile of paperbacks peeks out at me that I prized in my teenage years. I pluck the first in the series from the heart of the box and thumb my way through; it smells like then. It smells like humid midwestern basements and sticky summers curled up binge reading in our papasan chair with a Mountain Dew, like the burnt-dust-flickering of clip-on reading lights that never stay adjusted right, the stale sweat of overheard fights, familial discomfort, words ill-thought-out and overrun and left unsaid. The spine sighs as I split the pages open to a favorite chapter—this book was my escape route of choice after my parents and I moved to our fifth state when I was eleven. This is the second bit of joy: being nuzzled by nostalgia in all of its complexities. I brush the tip of my thumbs across each page and I swear I feel something release, tickling the tightness from my shoulders, and dwindling to a warm whisper. My lips tug upwards. I look to my left and catch sight of the half-empty get-rid-of-it box at my feet: my partner and I's attempt to downsize our accumulated youth, which we only seem to get more of as we get older. My belly clenches, my own laughter catching me by surprise. *I'm a sucker for it: for the sentimentality and burst of brightness when you encounter an object familiar and beloved, a hoarder of feel-goods. It does make it harder and harder to move, but I've done it several more times and states since then.* I stop. And I wonder, for a moment, if this is subconsciously my goal, to cling to the feel-goods, afraid that if I rest, even for an instant, the feel-goods will scurry far, far away.

Or, maybe, maybe it is to be able to have more moments like this, more frothy flirtations with the fragments of who I used to be.

I remember my mother's, well

my grandmother's chuckle and I'm not talking about the *oh, how unexpected* derisive snort, or the loving *you did your best* paired with an eyebrow raise—this chuckle was more akin to a *sigh*, a rasp of contentment that only comes when you know you are allowed to settle in. Maybe that's why I haven't heard it from my mom yet. It's something I've only recently started to feel brewing in my chest, my grandmother's almost sexy smoker's santa-like chuckle. Only after seven years of therapy, only after I started to get sick and accept my body's limitations are not limiting but a skein of potential, have I begun to unfurl the tight yarn knot wrapped haphazardly in and out and around my ribs, have I been able to breathe. Each throaty cough-chuckle shakes loose a bit of the yarn, combing away unnecessary fibers, the bits and bobs clinging too hard to how things have always been, raveling my approach to the everyday in order to knit some-great-something *some other way*, wrist braces and heating pads and ice packs at the ready. It's scary to let the ball of yarn unravel, to see the snags and pulls and tangles and frays and choose to laugh alongside them.

Playing dress-up

is one of my favorite parts
of performing, not for flaunting
garish gowns but for *feeling*—
silk against my skin, or velvet
or polyester or damask and
imagining, when I don different
costumes, I am not just outfitting
myself to play professional pretend,
but am, myself, *becoming*. Imagining,
when they ask *what do you want to be*
they actually mean *who do you want*
to be and you step onto the stage
clad in the high of knowing *exactly*
who you are and everyone believes
you, everyone congratulates you,
oh, you. You have it, they gush, staring
at your caked on face, hungering
for a taste of this knowing, wishing
they had it, too, not knowing
the secret is loving these others,
these characters, more than you love
yourself.

I know how to make a home

in a place where I didn't grow up, how to find
a decent spot in the city for my heart to be buried
and how to exhume her safely later. I know patience,
not for myself, but how to swathe my students
in it layer by layer until they know home, know
how to adorn themselves with glittering belief,
enduring on their own. I know how making
a home can shape-find-familiar a cocooning,
and, then, a becoming, a bursting, a new cadence
created—an intimate one-two step, which shapeshifts
into a satiating, all-consuming stroll, a dissolving,
a desire to find-shape a new home and I catch

the glitter in your eyes scouring for gold
and I reach towards you—when your fingers
and mine thread themselves through there is a forging
like how giving the right gift can fragment
time, form a wisp of liquid memory for us to drink
from whenever we need to slurp down the sensation
of seeing someone and being seen. I reach towards you
because I am intimately acquainted with long
walks in cities, those satiating, all-consuming strolls
that defy time, dissolving into the desire for a somewhere
else home that feels of something more. I feel
it, too, and cling tight to your hand to help mitigate

the urge to look look look for this home over my shoulder,
Instead, I extend my fingers towards the dirt, clench
her pulp, and invite you to listen—I know how
to listen in a way where my attention is a kind
of love, and when someone doesn't listen like love
back, I wonder what I might have done wrong.
You didn't do anything wrong.

The Blizzard of 2016 ranked as the fourth largest snowfall in Philadelphia history

the data we hold, our bodies, our memories; perhaps the more we have to spill, the tighter their hold. The more we have to spill.

Sara Ahmed

Twenty-two point four inches, only point eight inches short of claiming third. Since the start of this essay, my right thumb has ached.

The streets were strangled silent by several feet of ever-accumulating snow. At seven am, I steeled myself and trekked an hour east towards the theatre. And I shoveled. My mom had given me hand warmers the holiday before; I tucked them into the center of my gloves. And we shoveled. One hour. Two hours, Four hours. Eight. The little pocket warmers had long turned damp, leaden. The snow continued to smother the city. Prickling upwards, a thin, frigid circlet shrouded my right thumb. I adjusted the circlet, my ring—my mom and I both have one, each silver and each striped with four sets of four notches, a spontaneous purchase at the Cincinnati airport almost ten years earlier—and I shoveled, my body an electric current nipping at my nerves. Constantly buzzing, thrumming, until part of it wasn't. I couldn't feel my thumb. *I couldn't feel my thumb.*

I pushed through a day, two, *It ll probably go away. It has to go away. When am I supposed to go to the doctor?* When my doctor forced himself into the room two days later, my body bristled brittle. He angled his body sharp, denying me space, wielding my need for workers 'comp like a suffocant. The required questions idled gummy in his mouth, tacking onto his enamel, crawling across his molars, secreting a lazy satisfaction. He had better places to be until I proved otherwise. I wasn't interesting to him. My thumb wasn't either. But my break was brief. *I need to get this over with so I can get back to work on time.* I addressed his question about family medical history. His snail-like pace turned non-viscous. *How does she feel, having [this chronic illness]? It must be upsetting to her? How does your dad handle it? She s probably depressed, right?* The mucus guarding his mouth was whetted with intimate ideas of pain. *If I don t move, I won t shatter.* My throat wrapped itself in cotton, lending me its hydrophilic affinity. *If I don t move*—Nothing seeped from me but stillness.

He told me to wait it out another month. If I still worried, if I still thought I felt nothing, I should come back then. I wouldn't regain sensation in my thumb for two months, when a different doctor slid a long needle into the sheath of the tendon below my thumb. Once. Twice.

The first time I told my story was to HR. He pulled my folder box from the shelf and made a note. *Several other women also had uncomfortable experiences with this doctor. Maybe this is the last time we will send someone to him,* he said, smiling, trying to make a comrade of me. My closed lips stretched skeletal as my cotton throat disintegrated. I was sensation-saturated. Breached. Paperwork was completed, packed into a folder, parceled onto a back shelf. Hahnemann Hospital is closed now. I didn't go back.

A pilgrimage towards friendship, queered

I can't tell if I'm drowning or I'm floating so I just keep on going, going, and I'm running just to hide and I'm hiding just to breathe and around every corner is the same night on repeat.

Sir Babygirl

Midnight. My stoop calls to me, hollers at me to sit. I stumble over, pressing end on yet another call unanswered. *I shouldn't have left her.* My tongue tastes salt steeping in humidity. I swallow, my fingers slipping sticky against my phone. I'm alone. I'm alone and I shouldn't be, but I shorted the sense the city gave me, the sense it shouted into my ears. Gone is the safety, the comfort sung from the energetic heart of its teeming streets, of your body and their body and her body bumping against mine—a raucous metronome reliably reverberating through my head, keeping me steady. But now, silence. *She shouldn't have left me.* The absence of sound muffles into a ringing, a tortuous tinnitus tainting any approach of rational thought, there's only my uncertain misunderstanding of where I am tripping across my subconscious but then, a different ring—your voice cuts the silence, static slips into my ears and dilutes my coiling thoughts and everything else disappears, and I think *it might be nice to fill this new space with you.*

I have been to three psychics

across three states and each
of them tells me my tinnitus
is clairaudience. Well, they don't
say that. They say *you re an intuitive*,
they ask *have you ever had dreams
that come true? Have you known
things before they happened? Do you
hear a high-pitched ringing? Right
now? Do you hear it often? It s a spirit
letting you know they are there,
trying to communicate with you.*
I think of the woman who appeared
each night in my Providence
apartment searching for her child—
I haven't seen her since I moved.
I think of my friend who visited
my living room in Indiana while
I was asleep. I think of the stag
standing by my car, who appeared
days after my grandmother passed,
staring past the screen door into
my eyes, saying *don t go anywhere
today*. The ringing ruptures. A shift
in tone. I succumb to the sound.

Ariel

Do you look back at our photos and think, *we look like more than just friends*? Did you look back and hear a bell ringing, a sonorous, ear-eating spell only you could hear— you, unsplittable, who were never bound to me, but chose us—and elect to cast me aside? Is that what happened? You turned your head sideways, bapping your left ear with your left hand until a gleaming handle edged its ways out of your other canal: a break in air, a mustyness, a tart humidity as you continued to force-shake yourself loose until—not a pop—but the clear ringing stopped and a lathered bell-grub wriggled voicelessly in your right hand. Where did you put us? Where did you put the bell?

Writing the Body

1. Collect your thoughts one by one, plucking them from the air around you, until you have enough matter to mold into something meaningful.
2. Decide what is meaningful today. Decide by pulling a three-card spread but if at anytime your thoughts start to swirl like a fish in a school, stop. They might spill over and distort the cards. Start again.
3. Find your body. Sink your sit bones into the floor. You need your body to be grounded. You need to be grounded in order to read the cards.
4. Make sure your school of thoughts is near your body, but not in your body. Palpate your abdomen, your throat, your jowls—is there a quiver? a swell wave? Take two fingers and scoop the school out fish by fish. Arrange the bits of your fish-bodies close to, but not touching, the cards in some sort of significant shape. The bits of your body deserve reverence. Return to the cards.
5. Fill your body with the images, the symbols, the meanings of the cards, setting them alight one by one and pressing the remaining pulp into the grooves of your molars. Exhale. Glow.
6. Feed the glow with your thought-matter, the luminescent pulp, the bits of your fish-bodies, until you have consumed the whole school and are glowing profusely.
7. Reach your other hand deep into your mouth-gut. Your wrist may ache. Catch the glow.
8. Thread it through the eye of your leaden needle. Don't forget your needle. It's heavy. Lift it anyway.
9. Pull. Coax. Stitch. Embroider the haze to your head, the aches at your hinges. Secure the swells. Steadily
10. until you have secured the outline of your body, the fiery stitches shining softly as you, struggling, point, and flex, and point your foot again.

Body Memory

Sometimes at night my thoughts wander
to a friend I haven't spoken with in years
but who I loved briefly and intensely
and I feel the tear, an acidic aching
near the left pocket of my chest, a cavity
where I made a souvenir of/from myself
wrapping it with a whisper, *Tuck this away,*
carry me, display me, and it keeps me
up at night, the breeze from the window
unit catching the hollows of my skin.

Before therapy

There was Madeline. And I know I *know* the setup
sings romantic and it's not and it is because isn't it kind
of romantic to stumble upon a person who when you first speak to them
your breath gets tangled in your teeth your tongue tied so tight
it trips shouting inside *I know you* or *I need*

you—what's the difference really? One Sunday in Philadelphia—
yes, from *phileos* as in *dear* as in *beloved* and *adelph[ē/ós]*
as in *sibling-family* as in—I found you when I thrust the door open
into this windowless basement yoga studio, my eyes flicked to Madeline
stuck to her I did not look away I did not look away and we both mirrors

reflected. This class this day this meeting, the steam and sweat
the pieces and parts of this hot yoga meet-cute saturate my mind,
the best class I have taken since—in a long while, and my invitation
after, *would you maybe want to get coffee sometime?* I clench
my business card, *is this an odd way to offer an email?* and Madeline

grins and says *yeah* or *let's do it* or *that would be awesome* and pulls
out her card too. And it's not that I don't remember the words, which I don't
remember the words but mostly I remember the cling film feeling Madeline
wrapped me in *yes* caressed me with *I'd love to* swathing us
in something more intimate than the yoga studio could bear on its own

Loss upon returning home from visiting the Adirondacks with friends

In this poem curls a cat. She comes and curls herself to rest
on a woven yellow rug at my feet each evening. To clarify,
this rug is in my home and this rug is in the bathroom and
this rug is near the toilet, which is where I sit and why she is

nearby, a smile on her face and her pink-padded paws tucked tight,
waiting. And it is midnight. Or an hour past. Or sometimes, two. Because
late at night is when the next day nudges its way into my mind, swirling
its fingers amongst my lists of what not to forget and what not to forget and
what not to forget and I would much rather stay put than make my way towards

the next day, which she knows and is why she tucks herself in like a reminder: there is more
to tomorrow than what you face alone in your mind. She is curled up on this yellow rug much
like how I settle myself on my side when I sleep and in her little exhales are poems
of presence and love and lingering and patience. And when I do decide to rise,

when I tear my fingers away from my whirling worries and consent to meeting the next day,
she stretches in turn. She sits. She waits. And she guides me into the bedroom with her tail aloft,
constantly checking behind as Orpheus wished to do with Eurydice but could not, lest he break
his promise and, through his own folly, permit her to disappear. She checks anyway.

Her breathy poems promise some kind of sleepy sweetness and bid me to bed as she leaves
the yellow rug behind and turns and checks and turns except, suddenly, when she turns around,
when I imagine her turning, it is not I who is gone but her. And I can't help but feel
I didn't keep my end of the bargain.

Numbing nips my fingers

When I'm glide snip cutting and gluing
there is a brief moment in time
where my mind sets itself loose
and I know I'm consumed
by meditative
movement until
strangeness slips
sharp my
wrists

snag-
stops my
fingers from
papercutting
and aches upwards,
a tributary buzzing
branching outwards a network
of signals stimulates immense
pressure time day to day fragments me

Tendering the body

I want to know pleasure, to be her acquaintance, to be someone on a first-name basis, the kind of knowing where she stays with me, she stays and carves her initials onto the topography of my body, a flourish finished with a heart and a fond *4 Eva*. I want to know pleasure but I defer. All I can think about is the sensation of showering, of slipping into a high heat stream coursing across the terrain of my body kneading the knotted ridges of my shoulders, a whirling column, surging across the slopes of my side stomach and welcoming the purple striae dancing across my belly in a way I have not made time for.

TENDERING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH [Y]OUR ILL BODY

Writing a daily medical note, at the request of my gynecologist

I am at the end of my fragmenting hands. I only have nerves to tell me how far.

Jennifer Militello

There has been a sharp pain in my left hand, a something pain that is small, hot,

a bullet, forcefully pushing, incising, a sharp circle into my palm about an inch under my pinky. It pulses. It pulsates.

It has been happening and happening and happening without pause for a minute. For two. When I push gently on the place,

the ends of my fingers start to go numb, the pulsations dance outwards almost playful, like baby birds beaking. I am reading a book about the body, about knowing.

Jennifer Militello scraped together a home in a corner of my mind, "Doctor, there are too many nests for me." The pulsing pain has stopped,

but the prickling stars have claimed residence in my fingertips, not unlike the childhood surprise of a friend fake-breaking an egg yolk across

your scalp, the claiming you, the spidery sensation, the yolk-you-cannot-see.

CHARACTER LIST, FIRST ENCOUNTERS IN ORDER OF OCCURRENCE

BRITTANY (as told by FIRST STUDENT HEALTH GENERAL PRACTITIONER):

Reason for visit: screen for diabetes. Discussion Note: none recorded. General Appearance: overweight. Level of Distress: no acute distress. Mental Status: active and alert. Orientation: oriented to situation. Recommend therapy/psychiatry. patient states she has been seeing non msu therapist.

BRITTANY (as told by SECOND STUDENT HEALTH GENERAL PRACTITIONER):

Mental Status: active and alert; POLITE, INTERACTIVE. MOOD: EUTHYMIC. AFFECT FULL RANGE. THOUGHT PROCESS AND CONCENTRATION INTACT. TROUBLED BY FATIGUE, INTERMITTENT BOUTS OF SWELLING/STIFFNESS ABOUT THE INTERPHALANGEAL JOINTS OF B/L HANDS, INCREASED FREQUENCY OF URINATION, INDEPENDENT OF FLUID INTAKE, SLOW WOUND HEALING AND WEIGHT GAIN AND FACIAL HAIR GROWTH. SYMPTOMS PRESENT FOR THE PAST 12+ MONTHS, GRADUATE STUDENT, MATRICULATED TO EAST LANSING 8/2020. DESPITE FATIGUE, BRITTANY MAINTAINS ABILITY TO EXERCISE/ DISTANCE RUN WITHOUT LIMITATION. ENDORSES SIGNIFICANT LEVELS OF STRESS/ ANXIETY, FOLLOWING COUNSELOR WITH ADEQUATE BENEFIT PER BRITTANY, DEFERS MY OFFER FOR FURTHER ASSISTANCE WITH MOOD, DEFERS MEDICATION OPTION AT THIS TIME.

BRITTANY (as told by GYNECOLOGIST): is a 29 y.o. female. The patient's health is described as good. She does have regular dental visits. She denies of vision problems. She denies of hearing loss. Immunization status: is up to date. She does consume a diverse and healthy diet. She does have weight concerns. She exercises frequently. She does not use tobacco. She does drink alcohol. confirms drug use. Positive for fatigue. Positive for congestion. The patient is nervous/anxious.

BRITTANY (as told by FIRST RHEUMATOLOGIST): Level of distress - Normal. Overall appearance - Normal. Memory - Normal. Orientation - Oriented to time, place, person, & situation. Appropriate mood and affect. Chief complaint and reason for visit: no information. Discharge summary notes: no information. Consultation notes: no information.

BRITTANY (as told by GASTROENTEROLOGIST): Race: White. Ethnicity: not Hispanic or Latino. Birth sex: female. Smoking status: never smoker. Health concerns: data not available.

Assessment: data not available. Goals: data not available. Consultation note narrative: data not available. Problems: PCOS (polycystic ovarian syndrome), Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD), Hiatal hernia, Diarrhea, Elevated alanine aminotransferase (ALT) level, Elevated anti-Saccharomyces cerevisiae antibody, Elevated antinuclear antibody (ANA) level, Elevated AST (SGOT).

BRITTANY (as told by SECOND RHEUMATOLOGIST): Not hispanic or latino. Female. Problems: no information. Level of distress - Normal. Nourishment - Normal. Overall appearance - Normal. Diagnoses: Inflammatory Polyarthropathy, Pain In Unspecified Hand, Pain In Unspecified Foot, Insomnia, IBS, Fibromyalgia, Polyarthritis.

BRITTANY (as told by ENDOCRINOLOGIST): is a 31 y.o. Female with PCOS, IBS, GERD, who presents to the Metabolism, Endocrinology and Diabetes clinic for evaluation and management of Cushing disease. PhD student at MSU. She started having symptoms in August 2022 of fatigue, increased urinary frequency, easy bruising, poor wound healing. She started having chronic headache, brain fog, and numbness and tingling in hands and feet.

BRITTANY (as told by NEUROSURGEON): a very pleasant 31-year-old female who presents to Comprehensive pituitary Clinic for evaluation of a possible diagnosis of Cushing's disease. The patient started having symptoms in fall of 2021 that included poor wound healing and significant weight gain. The patient underwent a battery of tests and ultimately a ACTH and cortisol level was drawn that indicated high levels. The patient did undergo an MRI which identified a possible small pituitary adenoma located in the right pituitary gland. Patient has been followed by an endocrinologist and the workup to this point has been suggestive of Cushing's disease but not conclusive. She is being seen today to establish care with me within our neurosurgery clinic and to discuss surgical options moving forward and potential surgical resection of her pituitary adenoma. She is seen today with her partner. She is able to provide the entirety of her history and has a excellent full affect.

BRITTANY (as told by NEUROENDOCRINOLOGIST): 31 y.o. Female. Brittany came to see us for a pituitary abnormality and a question of Cushing's disease. She is currently a PhD student at MSU studying teacher education. In November 2023 she had a mildly elevated TSH 5.4 and was started on levothyroxine. She thinks this has really helped with her cognition and perhaps weight - weight has stabilized with no gain over the past four months. She denied exogenous steroids, though I did note in the external pharmacy information that a Medrol dose

pack was dispensed on 3/21/2024. Patient reports she did not take it. She was tearful. Lanugo hair noted on the face. Pink wide vertical striae on the abdomen, sides, next to the breast and behind the knee. Her striae are remarkable and we discussed the importance of avoiding exogenous (especially topical) glucocorticoids which she denied taking. I recommend to pay special attention to this in the future, since it is not always obvious to patients what is a steroid (e.g. a medrol dose pack). Going forward, if concern for Cushing's remains, it would be reasonable to redo screening tests, and we can see her back at any time if it is indicated with abnormal testing. Other etiologies for her skin concern should be pursued as well.

A how-to guide: learning to love your body ~~in 10 in 15~~ in 33 simple steps

how would you speak to your friend?/ they say/ find a mantra that works for you/ say it everyday/ tape it to your mirror/ make it your phone background/ unfollow/ unfollow/ unfollow/ surround yourself with body positive people/ in real life/ and online/ follow/ follow/ follow/ find a lotion you love/ lather your body with it/ repeat your mantra with each rotation/ with each rub/ get to know your body/ take yourself on a date/ get all gussied up/ wear clothes that make you feel bold/ make you feel beautiful/ make you feel unabashedly you/ where to find clothes in your size?/ give yourself time/ you'll get there/ you'll find those clothes/ it's so important to dress your body affectionately/ don't hide yourself/ don't be insecure/ your body has changed again?/ so what!/ that's natural/ all of our bodies will change/ it's a part of life/ it's a part of getting older/ and old is beautiful now/ didn't you hear/ how do you afford new clothes?/ where do you find those clothes?/ let alone bras?/ how do you deal with a rash under each breast?/ under your armpit?/ of course our bodies have friction/ it's natural/ try using antiperspirant/ try using barrier creams with zinc/ with aloe/ with petroleum/ with hydrocortisone/ / don't worry/ these are worthwhile investments/ just like clothes that fit right/ what do you do when your body is constantly changing sizes?/ it's medical?/ when your weight lives in different places?/ when your tummy is a drastically different pant size than your thighs?/ than your calves?/ when fashion doesn't fit like you?/ don't worry/ these are worthwhile investments/ just like practicing your mantra everyday/ every morning/ every night/ your body is extraordinary/ practice gratitude/ just practice practice

What facts, feelings, needs, or goals are in your head today?*

I have so many things to do *I just want to go home*
my mom started her second round of a new treatment
sometimes I think each day I choose to stay in another state is another
scar sliced into my heart, that in the future, I will regret my choice to chase
dreams and desires over purposeful proximity. Instead, the bulk of my time
is spent in the company of my thoughts, which are on indefinite lease by the
shouts and the worries of the so many things I have to do. And I just want to
go home. I just want to go home but if I were to relocate more
permanently, I fear I would regret not pursuing my dreams, which just reminds
me *I don't have enough time to do anything, I miss my family. My heart
hurts. I need a break. I don't want to go to work. I don't want to go to class.*
And yet doing for students, being for students, makes me feel something.
I want them to witness playfulness, risk-taking, and authentic (appropriate)
vulnerability. I want them to feel encouraged to be their whole selves.
I drink two coffees before class every morning. And I perform. And
we play. And we check-in. I invite them to share what's in their
heads and what's in their hearts. And I see. And *I'm exhausted.*
*I just want to cry, but I don't at the same time. I want school
to be over. I miss my [cat]. =(I'm sad. I miss my [cat]
again.=(* It has been three days and six months since
I lost her; she was my best friend. I remember,
a few days after, I started teaching a new
class, which we began with rants and
raves. Her death was too much to
put on them so soon. And they all
have so much going on. *[They]
just want to graduate already
and go somewhere warm.*
But we are all just
too *busy*. We're
just too
busy.

**When I wrote this poem, I was in the midst of teaching undergraduate students. This poem was written in witness and response to one of my student's written reflections on their check-in (with permission). The words in italics are the student's words.*

Rx: shoulds, no generics

I should have
had a doctor's
appointment today.
I say should because
I didn't. I say
should because I should
have gone to St. John's

but went downtown.
And I was late. My mind
preoccupied and my body
followed fruitlessly—
it's following now—
my head is a cloud,
not a cloud, but the space

a cloud leaves after
a rainstorm, when it's no
longer a high pressure
system descending, not
aerated. When I shared
my symptoms started
a year ago, my student

health doctor smiled a not-
smile. My student health
doctor asked if anything
specifically stressful
happened then. My student
health doctor shared
too much stress can cause

a lot of *feelings*. I should have
reiterated my fatigue, my changing
ability to read, the aches, the pains.
I should have described anew
my cut that has not healed over
the past year. I say should
because I didn't. I said

nothing, forgetting all
about Sophie's passing.
And after, when I remembered,
I'm glad I didn't. I'm glad

I kept her out of his
mouth, where his spit is gasoline
and his tongue is a match.

Did you know carpal tunnel can cause your fingers to swell, changing longstanding ring sizes?

It is always evening, past midnight, and I have just hurried to zip off last emails and have just hurried to pack tomorrow's backpack and just hurried to update my phone to-dos and scrawl down some notes. When I fade into bed, you tuck the sheets around me and turn the lights on low, the fan on high. I send my hand long towards you—

I saw in a video recently that sticking your hands past wrist-deep in rice and rotating them slowly in one direction, then the other, can help develop wrist strength. It is best to do this, this slow swish swish of your wrists, while relaxing, while watching tv, while doing some sort of thing that gives you plenty of time to steep your wrists in these rhythmic rice rotations and build strength. Oh, you may feel soreness, they said, but endure...swish swish and strength will come.

—and your fingers embrace my wrists. Yesterday, I leaned my neck on my wrist, my palm on my head and tried to cradle my mind. My heartbeat thumped in my ears as my pulse rang from my wrists, but it wasn't louder than the warm ache-ache-ache thrumming along with it. And tonight it is there and tonight you press circles, you make moons on my wrist and you aren't hurried at all.

I. The summit of my physical body/ Page of Pentacles, Reversed

I am intimately acquainted with yearning, with a body-ache so deep, a fascination of the world so fluid
I can't stop my body from reaching, fingers quivering forward to collect the next thing and the next
with no account for the capacity my bones can bear,
and as the bits of my curiosity accumulate, I feel a break,
my focus fuzzes, sinew stinging, but I don't stop
seeking bodily productivity, don't stop climbing
the stairs before me—instead, I stumble upwards, against
the protests of my body, my focus waning. The vantage shifts
to something stranger, less familiar. You looked away from me,
from my physical body, from the imprint these chronic illnesses
have started to make. Your eyes are closed, but I know you
are looking away. I think, *maybe I am overwrought, maybe
I shared from my own body too soon and too often.* From this vantage,
I start to see what you do, too.

II. In seeking compassion/ Ace of cups, Reversed

When I was younger, I briefly balleted—my body remembers:
my teacher, envisioning our hips as goblets, directing us, *imagine,*
your hips, your pelvis, carry a bowl of water that you must contain—
ah ah ah don t spill! Drop your tailbone down, balance it. Balance
it. Don t find a fake turnout, and don t spill the water! It turns out,
my left leg is a fraction of an inch shorter than my right; I learn
this when I suffer an injury to my piriformis, several years after
I set my slippers aside.

It prickles persistently still, diffusing down across the back of my hips,
decorating the unstable bowl of my sacrum with cords woven from bruised
purples and blush reds. I stand, the crack-pop of my body calls me back
to this moment, needing movement to moisten its palette, to nurture the new
growth rings resting heavy on my hips. I extend my own cup forward
cradled strongly by my capable hands, my blessed body, and I think
this cup is full enough, but it isn't. There is a leak. I don't know where,
but I know it's there, coiling its course through my body, waiting
to make itself known.

III. Room to improve/Knight of Swords, Reversed

Standing in the bathroom is hard
for me now. There are two mirrors
sitting at just-under-hips-height and
extending beyond the crown of my head,

and I hesitate to meet my own gaze,
hesitate to see the shifts documented
across the skin sitting at my midline—and it is not
my newfound stretchmarks I stall in meeting

head on, but their way of speaking to me, of speaking
with my body. I don't speak their language. I thought I did, but
I don't. My body is trying to tell me something and I can't read
it, can't trace its appeal for healing to the source of the flares, and I feel
like a fraud, an imposter, wearing out her welcome.

IV. In seeking connection/ Strength, Reversed

I clench my toes, grounding my grip in the coarse shag of the cut pile carpet. A lock pulls loose, a souvenir from the first day when getting up feels like too much. *What can I do from here?* I don't reply to the seven unread text messages on my phone. I don't mute the alerts pinging from my work email, my personal email, my second work email. I don't close my eyes. I want to. I want to rest. I want to embrace the sensation slowly and wholly and for this to be the beginning of me sitting with revolution in a room with my body. I want to be formidable. But I'm afraid. There is no amount of rest that can recover my body from the throes of its unmapped needs.

V. Grounding myself/ Four of cups

This summer, I don't set an alarm most days. I want this to feel nice. I want this to counteract my waking up one, two, three times a night, every night. I want this to feel-good away the sour dreams simmering on low when I do fall asleep. In the mornings, when I decide to stop shutting my eyes, usually sometime around eight, I oscillate sensations — switching off the window AC, saturating, switching on the window AC, an incessant groaning [from the AC—not me], and, finally, switching it back off when I can't swim through the sounds any longer. Neither the sweat nor the sound drowns out the permanent construction zone that has made a home in my head or the nausea niggling at my gut. Waiting can be disappointing, it can be a blur of unfeeling and feeling all too much, at the same time.

VI. My spirit wants/ The lovers

I haven't been able to crunch
into an apple for months, slurp
its juices from those endearing to-go pouches,
make an impromptu decision to trek
ten minutes and dig into a chunk of apple pie—

I don't eat them and I wait in a kind of stasis,
a purgatory of misunderstanding as apple-picking
season approaches—a must-do in Michigan. My body's
pain is more than apples. It's a gnawing around the stem
which persists whether suspended from a tree, sheltered
by a hand, or bolstered by the sturdy base of a basket.

It is the fog arriving at the orchard off-season, confounding
climate scientists as it descends, impenetrable, when all the orchard thirsts
for is for someone to take a closer look before the harvest.

Where do others 'bodies end and ours begin?

I sit on a plane, legs too short to rest on the floor and, instead, I twist-turn-repeat, my piriformis pulsing, hips too wide to not snuggle my seatmates 'but I'm lucky; today it's my partner. My ear buds reverberate, thrumming onwards across the canals of my ears not unlike the vibrations decanted from the pads of a cat's vocal cords, therapeutic thrums—it is one of my favorite not-secrets, how cats 'purrs are restorative, soothing their own wounds and inflammation alike. *Is it too much to hope my earbuds might replicate this, might quiet the aches in my bones, at the hinges of my hips?* I gaze forward trying to think of anything but the pinch of my piriformis, but my body drenched in discomfort until—my eyes find a focal point: I notice a bulge straddling a divide, gripping onto the backside of an earlobe while also holding fast to a small stretch of neck. *For Veronica, it was the rash on her hands he noticed first, causing Dr. Alex Karev to recommend she visit the free clinic as soon as she could* and yes, this may be a scene from *Grey's Anatomy*. Even so, I have been watching, percolating on the (im)possibilities. But you and I and you have medical manifestations that are missed, manifestations medical professionals only deem visible once they have made us into a portrait of illness that cannot be mistaken for anything else. This man, the back of his head not two feet from my lips—*Do I tell him? Does he already know? Would someone tell me, if they had recognized signs of my illness before I did?* I stare forward at the nodule, dark, palpitating.

SCHEDULE [non-teaching days]

TIME	EVENTS
6 AM	Wake-up, no alarm needed. This is your fourth time waking from sleep. Or, your fifth? Each wake-up, you check your phone—is it time to take your first medication of the day? Take your thyroid meds. Turn the bottle sideways. This tells you in an hour, in two, you have already taken your medication—take that, head fog.
7 AM	Wake up again. Become restless like the clatter of spilled rice. But don't spill the rice. Oh, God, then you'll have to pick it all up. Why is it so hard to pick yourself up?
8 AM	Consider if you want to stay in bed because it feels better on your bones or if you should store yourself in a different location so your rice body doesn't stir your partner. You opt for staying, worried moving your rice body will cause even more of a ruckus.
9 AM	Your partner brings you oatmeal, steaming, and an iced matcha. Slide on your compression wrist brace before scooping a spoonful. Heat helps. Ice helps. Make your body an altar to temperature. Tuck your hot water bottle tight to your abdomen, the second flush to your left hip. Ice your back. Ice both of your ankles. Elevate them on pillows or Squishmallows, as needed.
10 AM	Some of your rice has spilled, of course. Regather your rice grains, try to contain them in your bag. Lug this bag to get it dressed. Which bras still fit? Is it time to parse down your closet for the fourth time?
11 AM	Sit down at your desk, facing your webcam. Put on your mask. Secure your offerings for the altar to temperature around your body, out of frame. Take a meeting. Say you are doing okay.
12 PM	Are you hungry? You should be hungry. Sometimes you are, sometimes you aren't. Either way, spoon nutrients into your rice body. Have lunch on the bones of your papasan chair.
1 PM	Take your second set of medication. Your phone reminded you of this an hour ago. Why is it so hard to rise, to locate your pill organizer? You swallow all one, two, four, seven, ten, thirteen pills. The number changes with each doctor's visit.
2 PM	How Exhale your
3 PM	is it change positions work
4 PM	only take acetaminophen has
5 PM	afternoon? move your body

	deadlines
6 PM	Deadlines don't care if you feel dead.
7 PM	Eat dinner. Once, when you briefly had an illness requiring the local health department to contact you, to ask you what you had eaten in the last two weeks, you had to hand the phone over to your partner. You couldn't remember what you both had for dinner last night, let alone lunch two days ago or dinner the weekend before.
8 PM	Relocate your rice body one last time. Open your computer.
9 PM	Cruise Twitch for queer, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent internet streamers and friends. Not in a sexual way, but in a not wanting to attract attention to yourself kind of way, in a wanting to stay safe as an immunocompromised queer kind of way. Enjoy the fluff of friends who know you, who know schedules like yours. Embrace their offerings of distraction from the gluiness of your joints. Enjoy their airiness, their light.
10 PM	How aromatic is your rice body? Do you need to shower, to rinse each of your grains?
11 PM	Pinpoint your pill organizer for one last time, today anyway. Take your last nine pills. Take part of an edible.
12 AM	You think, the edible deserves its own altar, too. Thank you. Thank you for helping me find some sleep.

Did you know 4 of 5 people who get autoimmune illnesses are women?

When I waited in the packed waiting room no one my age in sight/ when they called my name and I rose from my chair, walked through the door too *seemingly* easy/ when my pain wasn't apparent enough/ didn't radiate outward enough/ didn't look the part of the character/ they were hoping to cast/ when the resident came in first/ when he took notes but forgot my symptoms anyway/ when he smiled and stutter-charmed his way past my nudges/ my gentle reminders of how my pain manifests/ when I mentioned how differently my body moves and doesn't move/ when I mentioned/ I know this/ I'm in tune with my body /because of regular yoga practice/ because it can't be regular anymore/ because I taught for several years/ because teaching on top of everything else is way more tokens than I have on offer right now/ when he latched on/ when he was compelled to tell me he always wanted to get into yoga/ how he's an athlete in other ways/ when he laughed/ when he took my recommendation for a studio and left/ still laughing/ when he went to get the PA I had an appointment with/ when she didn't come in/ when, instead, I heard him and her and someone else talking outside of my door/ and talking outside my door/ and talking outside my door/ how three came in/ how they offered no introductions/ how they talked at me/ how they dismissed me/ how he only did one physical examination/ the tender point exam/ how I looked up this diagnostic tool/ how I read/ how I read across several research articles/ the tender point exam is no longer an accepted diagnostic tool for said diagnosis/ how they refused to hear my intuition gathered/ grown/ by my bodymind/ how they had no interest in looking at my recent labs/ and flag/ after flag/ after flag/ on my bloodwork/ how they refused to order new labs/ and how/ the doctor/ who never introduced himself/ left/ so quickly/ and she/ the PA/ my PA?/ remained/ *Well isn't this good news/ she said/ what's going on/ the pain you are feeling/ it isn't real!! you're not really in pain!! your brain is just telling your body it is/ it isn't real/ isn't this good news!! isn't it*

Over-the-counter drug

Yesterday I left my house in a hurry, a little too late
for my rendezvous with a friend before class, the kind
of behind that has me walk-jogging with no shame

despite my path parading me by blocks-on-blocks
of undergraduate housing on a nice day—they're swarming
outside, lazing in the lustrous patches of light, limited

in Michigan—and I have sweat slicking my back,
painting streaks across my chest, in full view. I find ease
only when I arrive, *she isn't here yet*, when I dart towards

the back and slip into the restroom and pat pat pat my skin
soft with paper towels, chafing-be-gone. I emerge and she catches
me, full-on grinning, *they called both our orders*

at the same time, and I nestle an espresso fondly rattling—
yes, it is iced—in my hands as we wander from Quaint
Coffee Shop towards Uncertain Graduate Seminar, and

though my mind feels like muck, like coffee grounds forcing
themselves through a filter and sticking in your teeth when you suck
at that last sip, and though I have no energy to offer, her laugh
is my caffeine and I'm steeped in me again.

To-do list for May 14, 2024

Open the package that arrived yesterday with the SIBO breath test

~~Call insurance company to check if your coverage includes the SIBO breath test that my gastroenterologist (GI) ordered~~

Call your GI office — they ordered the wrong test, a test you already took. Did it take weeks to get here? Yes. Will it take weeks for the right test to get to you? Yes.

Wait on hold. Rock your head to the hold music, trying to make it more bearable.

Practice what you are going to say in your head. Practice again.

It's been twenty minutes and you are still wait—someone picked up! Turn on your I-went-to-middle-school-and-high-school-in-Indiana, I'm-almost-a-Midwestern-girl charm.

They said they are so sorry to hear this. They will take care of this. You have heard this before. Put a note in your calendar to follow-up with the GI office on Friday if you haven't heard back from them about the reorder.

Cross your fingers that you don't have to call back. That you can focus on your own work, writing your dissertation, instead.

Put a note in my calendar to call and reschedule your next GI appointment because the test won't be complete by the next appointment currently scheduled. Will this delay the appointment by several additional months? Yes. Yes, it will.

Since you are already doing calls, might as well: call your local rheumatology office to pay a medical bill. They won't let you pay this online. You could choose to write and mail a check. You could.

Call a different rheumatology office to follow-up on the referral your general practitioner (GP) submitted two months prior

Apparently this rheumatologist sent your GP a letter? And, apparently, this rheumatologist is not legally allowed to tell you what is in this letter. This letter about you and your health and if they will take you on as a patient. Even though you are the patient.

Call your GP's to inquire about a letter they were sent by U of M's rheumatology office regarding my referral. Ask them what it said. Try not to ask them why they didn't give you this information earlier. Try to channel your I'm-almost-a-Midwestern-girl energy again.

Your doctor's office did not pick up the phone. Try not to dread pushing more medical phone calls to tomorrow.

~~Put a note in your calendar to follow up with my GP tomorrow if you don't hear back from them today~~

Thank god. They called back. But, apparently, they didn't get a letter from this rheumatologist's office regarding my referral?

Call the rheumatologist's office back. Again. Ask them to resend the letter.

Share the fax number of your GP's office. Double check they took it down correctly. Wait on the phone while they send the fax. To make sure it happens. Please let it happen.

~~Call my GP back to give them this update. It should be coming. Please let it come.~~

When you call back, the receptionist at your GP's office said something like, *Silly me! We did receive this fax last month! I don't know how I missed it.*

On April 18th, it looks like. Hm. Apparently they need more information in order to process your referral and move it forward to their second stage.

Ask the receptionist to email you a copy of the fax or to upload it onto the portal. Which they should have done already. Over a month ago. Try not to cry. Try not to think about how this referral has been in process for over half a year. Cross a different set of fingers, hoping it won't take another six months to hear back. How many fingers do you have crossed now?

You couldn't connect with your doctor over the phone when you called their office, of course. Okay. Patient portal it is. Even though this doctor's office does not do well with responding to patient messages online.

On the portal, message your GP and ask them to follow-up with the additional information requested by the rheumatology's office to process your referral, almost a month after the fact.

Oh, god, it's 8:30 PM. Take your 14 meds. It's 30 minutes late, sure. And they are hard to take with all of the fingers you have crossed now. You can't uncross them.

Okay. Better than not at all. Better than not at all.

~~Go on a walk~~

~~Work on revisions for my dissertation~~

Purgatory Lexicon

after Darlene Laguna & Kay Ulanday Barrett

the tough
bit about this is you
have a pituitary adenoma
you can see it's right there there
four millimeters just a cute little adenoma
I'd love to take that out Oh
yeah That'd be a nice one yeah
Very good anatomy the point is
you have a very nice pituitary adenoma but
you know we'll see we'll see

the doctor
he wished
for a definitive
a yes or no
test, explained

the other
doctor she just
wants to wait
wants me to wait
and watch to feel
worse, only then
to come back for
more screening

he explained
cyclical Cushing's is
real, it's tough to be
in-between when
medicine, he believes,
is not an exact
science, especially
with your disease.

he shared like a
sleepover secret

*we don't understand Cushing's disease enough and patients
suffer because of it*

bemoaned the
blunt tools
doctors are handed
to diagnose

complicated diseases
like yours
he agreed research
needs to catch up

he empathized
what you are
going through
is not easy; we've
got to figure this
out he said let's
follow up in a
year he said you
are not alone.

*Was your appt today or next Friday?
Any news on your end? Have you had a follow up with a dr?
Poor friend, I m sorry :(
Sorry you re feeling down. That was me yesterday lol.
I hope you appointment goes well <3
It is good for it to sound like you are getting somewhere close to a resolution.
Do you have an appointment yet for your surgery?
Did you already have your surgery?
So what s going on with the surgery? Did you get a date?
How long is a typical cycle? Have the diet changes you made helped anything?
I m so sorry. Our medical community isn t where it needs to be.
Know how frustrating this is.
Awww no! Sorry to hear that :(
Ok well good luck with this and next steps.*

Is this what catharsis feels like?

I send my legs long, striding steadily into the air. Ellipticalling is not my favorite exercise—I prefer group classes or outdoor runs so long I forget what worries are circling my mind. However, the pandemic has dictated many changes. The television flickers, this week's arbitrarily selected show snags at my whorling thoughts as its playful sentimentality pulls heat to my cheeks. Laughter. I feel light, effervescent at first, my body steady, flying perpetually forward. Continually advancing, ever progressing, until the sensation bubbles over. My body is flooded with an inertia wracking at the box containing my exhaustion and flinging my feelings about faster and faster until my body succumbs to my mind and it is a breathless collision—and by that I mean I have found myself wondering *what is it like to have an anxiety attack* and if it might feel like my body tangled in the throes of an elliptical, the sensation of a sob colliding with a gasp and a gasp and I can't quite catch my breath but *isn't it awful? What is happening on this show, at my school, in this country, in our world, in my head, in my head and in my body?* I leak thick, steady tears, which rival my rivulets of sweat, and that is saying something. But I am also saying to myself *on the elliptical, I don't let myself cry*. Oblivious, my legs continue to lunge forward unceasingly, latched into its large plastic footholds.

Phantosmia

There is bread burning. There was bread burning yesterday morning, in the hallway of our home. *Are you burning bread? Or making burnt toast?* I jest. My partner stares, confused. Today, the burning bread rides shotgun with me in my Mazda hatchback, an uninvited guest on an ordinary array of errands—haircut, coffee and gluten-free donuts. She seethes. Her unseeable smoke tickles, taunts my nostrils with a kind of hostile hospitality and I freeze, flooded, on autopilot. But my body keeps moving through the motions, keeps anticipating what the car needs to navigate us to Strange Matter (an aptly named café—something strange is the matter with me). In so many ways, I am meeting my body for the first time. So many times, I wish I could render my body anew, sift her down to her basest grains, knead her, and let her rise again.

TENDERING [Y]OUR FUTURES

The world has a habit of ending

*The world
has a habit of ending, every grandmother
and father knew well enough** and I wonder
if we know it and if we know it well enough:
why must we pack it away? Why is ending
an untold lore we adults keep close, shoving
the crumbling detritus of secrets-stashed
underneath our nails, the pain piercing
our nail beds pink as we pack away

the whispers tight. And children are perceptive,
they will listen, they will breathe in the tendrils
of our stashed whisper-secrets and breathe out
fury, spitting gravel from between the slits
of their teeth, making dust of our detritus and meals
from the fruit of our misguided misgivings.
The world has a habit of ending and we can
choose to embrace the dust, the cracks,

the blistered hope, which underscores adult
bodies, and choose to love that we are still
moving through the grit, we are still learning,
and sometimes we leave whispers in our wake.
The world has a habit of ending, and in ending
there is fantastical possibility that can only be
dreamed by you and I and them together if you
and I can let go of our belief that we know
well enough.

*The first line of this poem is borrowed from the poem
"In the Meantime," written by Max Garland

On the anniversary of my retinal tear

His face is so close to mine that the side crease of his lips would graze my cheek if not for my mask, for his mask, and there is something not unlike intimacy, a doctor-patient dance of sorts, as our faces move side to side, as I stay still and he approaches. It's not unlike intimacy when he asks after my family, about their medical history and my own, all without looking away from my eyes, while my own are frozen foreword. He asks if I like green leafy vegetables and I wonder if he is giving me a hint only his proximity can afford, that maybe his eyes brushed across my lips and captured spinach in my teeth from my morning smoothie. I say yes. You could definitely say I flipped my lid(s) for him, him probing all the while. And it was not unlike intimacy when he tells me about the hole in my retina, when he guesstimates how long it has made its home in my eye, when he sets me up on a blind date of sorts with his colleague in two weeks' time even though, when I look at my schedule, there is no hole to be found—I have to schedule around their availability, and I do, and my face flushes (again, not helped by the mask) and my stomach twists, nausea prickling at the back of my throat. And I know this is a moment I will never forget. And I don't know who to tell, and whether this relationship is a brief stint in time or the start of something thickening.

Appointment follow-up, request for care, and response re: steroids
a burning haibun after torrin a. greathouse

Dear Dr. [neuroendocrinologist],

After reading your patient notes, I wanted to reach out and clarify a note in your charting (“external pharmacy information that a Medrol dose pack was dispensed on 3/21/2024...we discussed the importance of avoiding exogenous (especially topical) glucocorticoids which she denied taking. I recommend to pay special attention to this in the future, since it is not always obvious to patients what is a steroid (e.g. recent medrol dose pack)”) This is true — CVS did fill this medication. However, I reached out to Dr. [endocrinologist] and ultimately decided to not take them.

During the appt you asked what Dr. [endocrinologist]’s impression was—her and Dr. [neurosurgeon]’s were that I had cyclical cushing’s disease (which I didn’t get to share during our appt). Dr.[neurosurgeon] was strongly in favor of surgery. I have read extensively on cyclical cushings and know that all test results (from blood cortisol and ACTH, to saliva testing and urine testing) are often not the most reliable. Both Dr. [endocrinologist] and Dr. [neurosurgeon] reiterated this to me.

Yes, I was tearful—because it felt like you had your next steps decided before coming into the room/meeting me. I was also extremely disappointed that (beyond yes/no to surgery) nothing else was done to assess my condition, offer diagnoses or further routes of care, or provide other avenues for treatment of my cyclical cushing's disease.

I hope that, upon receiving and reading this message, you will reflect on our appointment and consider offering medical care beyond ‘it’s a no to the surgery ’via message or virtual appt. These symptoms, of which I brought a list and maybe only 1/4 are mentioned in the appt notes, have drastically impacted my life for the worse. It’s my hope that, as my doctor, you’d want to help me do something about that.



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ote in your charting s which she denied taking. I reasked as me l dose pack”) you asked your next steps had nothing I I hope upon receiving and readi i t's It's my hope asked

Patients will know or be able to

<p>Objective(s) — Patients will know or be able to...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintain a pleasant enough demeanor in order to avoid being classified as hysterical ● Advocate for themselves when their primary care doctors dismiss their symptoms ● Provide lab work that very clearly points to the Thing That is Wrong ● Call their insurance company and specialists' offices and their insurance company and their primary care office and their pharmacist and their insurance company as many times as needed
<p>Evidence of Understanding (What will I look/listen for in my 'assessments' of my objective(s)?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● You may be passed from GP to specialist to specialist to specialist: Don't cry. Make eye contact. Don't cry. Don't be too aggressive. Smile — to them, you're a woman, you have to smile some. But, not too much...be sure to 'wear' your pain. But, not too much. Never be too much. ● Navigate telling your story through head fog and memory loss. Share your symptoms. You can consider bringing in a typed list—this is surely evidence of understanding your own body, of notating experience as data—but know that many doctors will take the list, not look at it, not give it back. Find a new doctor, if needed. Convince your GP to write another referral. ● If your labs come back with a plethora of flags, this is a win! If your labs come back 'normal' or mostly 'normal', take a deep breath. Magically procure something else that may speak to the Thing That is Wrong—you can do research, but be sure to not to let them know you've done too much, they won't like that. ● Endure long holds with aggressively okay music alternating at very quiet and very loud and, whatever you do, don't become oversensitized. Don't lash out at your insurance representative, your specialists' administrative assistant, your insurance representative, your GP's administrative assistant, your pharmacist, or your insurance representative. It's not their fault—right?

Standard(s)	<p>The American Medical Association offers principles to guide standards of conduct. The standards that follow are a part of this list:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I. A physician shall be dedicated to providing competent medical service with compassion and respect for human dignity. ● III. A physician shall respect the law and also recognize a responsibility to seek changes in those requirements which are contrary to the best interests of the patient. ● V. A physician shall continue to study, apply and advance scientific knowledge, make relevant information available to patients, colleagues, and the public, obtain consultation, and use the talents of other health professionals when indicated. ● VIII. A physician shall recognize a responsibility to participate in activities contributing to an improved community.
Types of participation offered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Individual, At home research ● Individual, Advocacy ● Individual, Labs ● Individual, Masking ● Individual, Medication ● Individual, Pain Management ● ‘Partnered’, Medical appointments ● ‘Partnered’, Phone calls ● ‘Partnered’, Prescription writing
Materials and/or Advance Preparation Needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A complete understanding of your holistic health, including from before you realized you might need to go to the doctor ● Recollection of all symptoms, their occurrences, the duration, their pain impact but only on a 1-10 scale. ● Knowledge of your family’s medical history, assuming you have access to these people and this information. ● An understanding of the individual drugs you are taking—certain lab procedures require you stop taking specific drugs for a number of days beforehand. It is very likely your doctors may not inform you of this, which could result in a false lab result. Certain drugs cannot be taken in tandem with others. ● Enough ‘free time’ to research doctors’ offices, make appointments, do research as needed, make phone calls, etc., etc., etc.. ● Enough financial privilege, whether through family, friends, or a partner, to support the work that needs doing in the above statement. ● Sleep. Preferably ~8 hours a night, so that sleep isn’t ascribed as the reason for all of your emergent symptoms.

On Reading Braving the Body

The olympics are on,
loop earplugs in my ears, engines
rip-roaring upstairs as children make
runways of hallways, twisting
and twirling roller bags, playing
we re going on vacation while
they, in fact, are on vacation.

I sit down to read *Braving the Body*
sharing space with the broadcast of men's
gymnastic finals—they are rotating
through Japan/ Great Britain/ the United
States, three empires doing their worst
in order to not tumble down
from their idea of the top and my thoughts
snag on Nadia Colburn's words, *I/
who did not know how to love/
my own body, who mistook/ the world
for a task*" — this idea stim-sticks
in my mind, playing over the humming,
the woof-woof-woofing of the children
as they fly off to destinations unknown,
while my eyes are pulled back and
pulled back into the momentum
cultivated by these young men
in communion with their bodies,
with the beauty of a turn, a twist, my focus
caught in the velocity of his force
as flourish, as fancy, as fascination
and, *wow*, imagine the abundance
our bodies could fashion and balance
and become if we wielded them
with elegance as our intent as opposed
to weapons for accumulation.

When the Wright brothers fruited and failed
and fruited and failed and fruited and found
their way to flight, they had no intention beyond
seeing if they could. No intention became
an aerial—the execution: bodies in planes
bringing bombs to other bodies.

The first time I asked for a seatbelt extender

The chime struck green—the flight attendant spared no glance and continued pouring off champagne in first class, waiting for my need to ripen. Never had I ever used the call button before. Until now. Sitting, aching, it was only after the doors closed, when she shimmered towards her seat to strap herself in for takeoff, she saw me and remembered. She hollered across the rows, her voice foraging for the flight attendant upfront. I waited, hands primed to pluck and prune the polyester strap, to get it settled in around my waist.

They glissaded toward my row, planting the belt in my palms, *Please return this. Please don't steal it. Or sell it.* My voicelessness irrigates them with unbelief. *Yes, it really happens. I rarely get them back anymore.* I blink and my not-silence pops ultrasonic. My stress sings loud.

I sow buckle to retractor and retractor to buckle. Finally secure, the seatbelt respires, taking in oxygen and settling in with sugars, and bears fruit. Berries and branches burst from my body. With each exhale, the strap stretches its roots, my roots, sprawling across one arm rest, and another.

We extend ten thousand feet into the air. Higher. I catch sight of the first flight attendant being flagged down with an empty champagne glass. She returns with a different bottle. Fizz puffs from its mouth and the glass floats upward: a sustained aftercontraction. Never have I ever drank champagne on a plane before. She looks up at me, smiles sunlight. *Did I say that outloud?* She pours one off. Another. Another. An ebullition of excess. My branches expand unabashedly. The other passengers follow suit: their seatbelts, once strangled for nourishment, respire. They photosynthesize. They take up space-time in the tastiest of ways: languidly, lavishly. Fruit buds freckle their skin and the seats, our belt-roots expand into a full blown system, fungi frothing at our not-fingers as we form a social network. Our capillary thin root tips tangle alongside one another, touch base with one another, tend to one another. I am uncut. The tension eases. We are ripe.

Pantoum for sick, fat hygiene

The way I wash my body is different now
Showers were my regulating space
a daily date I looked forward to
I can't tell you exactly when this changed

Showers were my regulating space
Every several days, when I have the energy to get in, they still bring me solace
I can't tell you exactly when this changed
My eyes reject my contacts now; the whole bathroom a fog

Every several days, when I have the energy to get in, they still bring me solace
I lift one breast and my soap-filmed fingers polish, this warm cave revealed
My eyes reject my contacts now; the whole bathroom a fog
Still, I spelunk: the neighboring cave, the rock shelter under the crescent of my belly
with geological veins

I lift one breast and my soap-filmed fingers polish, this warm cave revealed
and though it's not daily, it's a new ritual, a time-tested one
Still, I spelunk: the neighboring cave, the rock shelter under the crescent of my belly
with geological veins

I've always loved rocks; when I was eight, I carried a soccer ball sized quartz 20 minutes home

and though it's not daily, it's a new ritual, a time-tested one
My body is metamorphic—pressure, illness, heat, and time sculpt my queer sediment
I've always loved rocks; when I was eight, I carried a soccer ball sized quartz 20 minutes home
My body is metamorphic—maybe I can love her, too

Terminal Degree

two books on my right/ five on my left/ one in my lap/ sometimes I think this degree is killing me/ *she s all I ever wanted/ I m too deep in this/ I can t walk out now/* I can't get up/ one of my cats is curled into the cradle of my pelvis/ her smile soft/ her toes relaxed/ my neck/ my hips/ my back/ compressed against the spindliest joints/ wedged jarringly/ into a fraction-corner of my papasan chair/ it's bones skin-stamp their way into my epidermis/ balancing crumbs/ crowning a plate/ I can't get up/ a crushing feeling/ my joints sing/ in the most not-lovely way/ a song/ which now plays in my body on loop/ I breathe/ because I have to/ because what else can I do/ I recall/ last month/ I went for lunch/ with my advisor and her friend/ a poet and a novelist/ her table was the coziest cobweb/ my bones were good-stuck/ lifted/ light/ my aches/ my pains/ silent/ or/ at least/ whispering/ each moment/ mesmerized me/ more/ time was sticky/ teeth-tender microgreens/ crackling romaine/ vibrant radicchio/ stinging onions/ and peppers/ in that turn-it-up kind of way/ buttery avocado/ white wine/ these women wove/ a warm afternoon/ an entanglement/ I would choose/ again/ and again/ I scraped my plate clean/ once/ twice/ and I listened/ and I heard tales/ not unlike my own/ tales of illness/ illness emerging/ illness arriving/ during graduate school/ during my same program/ illness swept aside/ concerns squashed/ even though/ no one knows a web/ like the spider/ who wove it/ I scraped my plate clean/ a final time/ I don't think/ I could have ever been satiated/ been full enough/ of the company/ anchored in/ this web of ours/ of the belief/ she offered me/ and I her/ and I her/ and she me/ and the security/ their/ our/ threads of belief/ spun

Sculpture Garden

On days where my fatigue has turned
to frostbite, I create a warming companion
of a dozen or two squishmallows, wrap
myself in two to four blankets and do
my best to find rest, to scour the ceiling
for it, pluck it from the air and swallow
it whole like a sleeping pill.

Instead the frost sours my chance at sleep.
I find some in-between state, a purgatory
of not sleep-sleep and watch ghosts of myself
carrying books room to room I can't read
anymore, unlacing Saucony shoes after long
runs I can't complete while my-*her* Shiba takes
to faer legs like a salt lick.

I open my eyes. I close my eyes. I open
myself to the possibility of these ghosts
not being hauntings, the possibility
of sitting with discomfort, of knowing
these things I love are still things I love
even if they have frozen, even if
they have turned into echoes I hear
and hear and can't sing back.

HELP WANTED

Looking for a grief compactor available for immediate start. No degree needed. Must have experience with a soap-like sadness, filmy, heavy on the body, crusted into the corners of your gut. Must have experience repurposing said sorrow-soap-scum, in collecting each patchy piece of pain & leaving no flake of love behind, in simmering & straining sadness, molding it into something smaller, more palatable to keep close. Please help me keep her close.

How do you put fanfare into a poem?

When I walked into the classroom, they were already enmeshed with one another like a zipper threaded tightly on a jacket. *Did you all do this?* I crooned. The answers assent and range in intensity. I had walked from one place still tuning, trying to locate my middle c but ringing flat, and suddenly it's brassy and bold—I'm bold—I strut to literal applause across this runway scaffolded, zippered, by their hands. Bellows of recognition tune me true: I'm back at middle. There is something about an orchestra being assembled, finally all back together after a wintering apart, that is rich and needy and affirming. *I have a secret*, my body chirped. *I came by Friday to check this place out before we gathered here today, and it was just dreadful. No chairs, but rigid desks?* I flopped into one for dramatic effect. My body wailed exaggeratedly, *how will we even get comfortable?* And I laughed. We are a we again. And we laughed, hitting tones and timbres all our own.

Pre-show prep list

When I wake up to teach, it's like preparing
for a favorite performance: maybe the morning
starts groggy but I am allowed that simple
pleasure, the sensation of the everyday
person, *slow to start, but first coffee*, at least until one
hour before curtain when I must get into costume
and move through the motions of my carefully curated
pre-show list designed to rally my most radical,
loving teacher self to stage, no matter
the day, and that means music to start, manic
melodies which sneak their buttery sounds
into my brain until they live there on loop, reminding
me of the joy that pulses through my veins when
I allow my body to experience the ease that can
live between unchoreographed moments, if only
there is enough peace and permission to live thus.

Group Juggle

The best thing that could
happen yesterday did, I think,
which is that my student forgot

my name during class in
front of all of his peers, which
sounds bad, maybe, but it was

a gift—he gave them all
permission to make mistakes
and what an absolute kindness

in a world where we all collect
challenge after challenge
and inscribe them onto the already

over-cluttered murder walls of our
mind, where they can't leave—these
thoughts are not for others to witness,

not for the college classroom—except
sometimes all that weight makes us slip,
makes us forget, and a very real playground

ball is lobbed our way and only our
professor is left to receive it and maybe
you were trying to remember other folks '

names, maybe it's all just a lot in the moment,
literal balls slap-thunking slow thunder
from hand to hand, creating a path yet

unforged with your classmates, and what
is the worst thing that could happen? I hope
it didn't feel that way. I hope my laughter

and maskful smize assuaged you. That you
realize your unexpected fumble was an offering
to our community and maybe you see I meant

what I said, that we can ask each others 'names,
that we are all just doing our very best to juggle
all of the things, and together, it might be okay.

A room of our own

an ekphrastic poem after Driobe and her Handmaidens by Arthur Bowen Davies

*They were entrancing, these girls. And entranced. They moved like a single organism—or,
rather, a single collective mind. A hive of girls. A swarm of women. A murmur of dancers.
They threw their heads back in ecstatic joy.*

Kelly Barnhill, When Women Were Dragons

Hands clasped, sweaty and tight, we eagerly entangle
ourselves in each other in the way only girlhood
garners, a distilled knowing—this is not friendship

but fierce fellowship, a once-in-a-lifetime fondness
which thrives best in buried places, in the forest
where the alarms sounding in our heads are finally silenced

and we dress in all the ways we would worry and warn
ourselves not to otherwise, if we weren't here, gossamer
gowns made filmy from our merriment. Our joy reverberates

as we toss toasts side to side, and if you were to step back
and look, you would see pleasure pulses across our bodies,
inseparable from our collective consciousness and, if you wish
to fly, to be lifted into your own, you only have to extend a hand.

Classroom rituals

Each afternoon, at 12:40 PM, we sit together in a preordained shape, one we are compelled to make and we steep in each other's eyes, soak and stir and repeat, saturate but don't overheat. It's our rite—we share joys, we speak with such fervor that sometimes, in revisiting, I forget. I forget we are each wearing masks and every time I pause to sip water, I take a step away. Each time delight overtakes me, I oxidize, sipping smiles through my teeth, and though I cannot pour a cup of the contentment percolating on my palate, this does not mitigate our mirth—a fruity blend permeating the room tender and treacly like dripped honey slipping into a steaming cup of black tea, best savored slow.

An ode to fish pose

which I step into feet first every
Thursday, clinging to the high-low
table in my chiropractor's office
as it sends my upper body long towards
the floor, head resting below my heart.

To the *oohs* and *ohs* and the *yeah*,
that feels okay, to the sudden intake
of air, to the big belly breath
and the extended exhale that comes after,
sizzling across the ridges of my teeth.

To releasing the aching the burning
the cramping the diffuse; the dull, excruciating
numbness; the pounding, pulsating, radiating,
sharp-shooting-stabbing-stiffness; the throbbing;
the tingling-tightness, the weakness, the ascension.

To the crack of relief that comes
when I make a snap decision, letting go
of the control I've been death-gripping,
wiggling my toes until—the thwack
of release, shoulders inching lower, wider,
heart shining upwards. My throat opens.

I had the worst blood draw of my life

fasting, what bloomed across the brackish
clay of my body, watercolor gone awry, bleeding
from one pigment into the next and the next but
honestly—and if you can't be honest in a poem,
where can you be?—it almost felt auspicious,
the prominent granulation, the variegated wash.
Here, I trace the bruise drippings far beyond
the fold of my elbow, *is a visible etching of my*
pain. I marvel/ I pull my phone from my pocket/
I capture its likeness/ I almost don't want/ I don't
want it/ to fade away. The phlebotomist rendered
a portrait of my illness with fugitive color
trilling *be mindful/ handle with care/ I ache/*
smart/ burn it says. *Tend to me carefully/*
intentionally/ gently/ tenderly and, as I continue
to weep, to flush, believe me.

Tendering the Classroom: Illness, the Body, and Teaching

*To believe in the truth of yourself, your body, and your pain
is activism, advocacy, and an act of survival.”*

-Jameisha Prescod, SICK Magazine

*I will have my serpent s tongue - my women s voice, my sexual
voice, my poet s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.”*

-Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”

*It s a journey . . . that I propose . . . I am not the guide . . . nor
technical assistant . . . I will be your fellow passenger . . .”*

-Nikki Giovanni, “A Journey”

It’s the last day of class. We have written love notes and juggled balls and reflected on class readings and activities. We have identified with blobs and written ourselves letters aspiring towards our teacher values, imagining our first day of school. We are discussing moments from those moments that are still clinging to us.

“I don’t want to have to grow up.”

I laugh. “Do I look like I’m grown up?” Thinking the answer would be obvious. Oversized smiley face t-shirt¹⁰, septum ring, tattoos, black crocs with chains.

“Yes.” It came immediately. Heads nod around the circle. “You seem like you have your shit together.” I laugh again. Another student, “You have such grace.” This cuts my laugh as it bubbles its way to the corners of my eyes.

“You don’t have to grow up if you don’t want to. It’s a choice. As far as everything seeming like it’s under control? That’s the secret to being the teacher. You can make the rules for your own students. You can make your own grace.”

¹⁰ The back says “The world needs your magic.” I wore this shirt just for them. And I told them this, too.

I'm not sure if this is wisdom—I don't intend it to be. I want it to be permission. You can give your students grace, even when it seems there is none to be found. You should give it to yourself, too.

When I was in middle school in the early 2000s, I discovered the movie version of *Rent* the musical (2005). I first watched it with my mom. I later watched it many times on my own and with my best friends at the time, from late middle school through high school. This musical struck a chord in me (pun intended) that I didn't know could sound. In this manuscript, I have included a poem written about one of the main characters, Maureen (portrayed by the amazing Idina Menzel), and her unnamed bisexuality. Her unnamed bisexuality, of course, was paired with rampant slut shaming, connotations of her sexual desire—including cheating—all being tied specifically to her bisexuality. When it came to this musical, there were all kinds of things it steeped my heart in. The musical opens with, perhaps, its most well-known song, "Seasons of Love". Each of the ensemble members take the stage before they transform into the characters they will portray over the next 135 minutes. The lyrics they open with:

Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes/ Five hundred twenty-five thousand moments so dear/ Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes/
How do you measure, measure a year?/ In daylights, in sunsets/ In midnights, in cups of coffee/ In inches, in miles/ In laughter, in strife/ In five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes/ How do you measure a year in the life?/ How about love?/ How about love?/ How about love?/ Measure in love/ Seasons of love/ Seasons of love. (2005)

Then, it was resonant in a "who am I" kind of way, mixed with sensations of time and friendship and shapeshifting and repressed queerness. These feelings still live as layers, of course—as aspects of my identities as a young person that will always inform part of how I move through and make meaning alongside this world we inhabit. However, now I bring to these lyrics new layers: How do we measure the feelings and sensations our bodies experience? How do we quantify and qualify ourselves as queer when we hold nonbinary identities, identities which don't fit an either/or and don't have a series of markers that define our experiences? How do we measure the zaps and stings and numbness pricking at our skin, the hours on the toilet, the variety of new colors and events our body shares with us, on a scale of 1-10 for our doctors? *No, no, no, I know you are experiencing many symptoms, but which affects you **the most**?* How do

we measure the labor given by our classroom teachers, their relationships with their students, with their school, their community, and themselves?

The instinct of teacher education for so long—as well as most professional careers—has been to separate the experience of the body from the work required of the mind. Writer and teacher Alexandra Kleeman describes her experience with the conditioned separation of the mind and the body, noting, “I came to writing about the body when I already had a writing practice going on, but I realized that I was treating my body like an impediment to writing. I was trying to sort of tamp it down when I got hungry, or when I got tired, or when I ate, or needed sleep. I was moving further away from my body and also being very unhealthy” (2016). As a middle and high school student, I felt the pressure to leave bodily feelings and experiences at the door. However, early on in my career as an educator, I veered away from this instinct. In hindsight, this may have been because when I experienced this as a student, it felt as if parts of my identity—my queerness, my neurodivergence, and, now, my chronic illnesses—were erased. Despite all of our best efforts, the context of our bodies and their experiences cannot and should not be separate from the work asked of us in our everyday lives. Kleeman continues:

the way back into my body was more thinking about these unseen processes...how they connect me to the world because the number one thing about my body, for me, is that it is my interface with the world. Without it there's nothing for my mind to do. Although sometimes when your mind is really active you can almost believe it will go on by itself. But it doesn't. (2016)

The experiences of our bodies not only inform how we make meaning but also the degree to which we *can* make meaning at a specific moment in time. And this transition is one that will not be made easily or instantaneously. We must offer ourselves grace, as well as our students. We must embrace tendering.

Tender has a strikingly apt etymology for this context—the context of an approach to teaching, of an approach to how we honor our bodies—and it is this earlier etymology that grounds my use of tendering as a pedagogical approach. Our current knowledge points to the English word, *tender*, emerging in the 13th century as an evolution of the Anglo-French adjective *tendre*, used to name *softness*, *delicacy*, and *love*, as well as the French verb *tendre*, which was used in place of *to offer*, *to stretch* or *hold out*. The French verb *tendre* was born from the Latin, *tendere*, which similarly means *to stretch* or *hold forth*. How might we approach our

students with softness? How might we scaffold our classroom environment and the activities we ask our students to undertake—especially the activities that ask students for their vulnerability, to share bits and pieces of themselves with their teacher or classmates—with love? How might we build an education space so its foundation is an offering: I offer myself to you, I will stretch myself alongside you, I will hold forth my support?

It was early April, the last month of class this past semester—we shortened the semester this year and the students felt it.¹¹ Many of them lingered after class today, specifically to chat with four student teaching interns, my former students from Fall 2020, who were present for a Q&A session.¹²

Afterward, the four of us migrated to Moka & Co, a Yemeni coffee company in East Lansing, across three cars. And we caught up, though, there should be a more apt word for professors catching up with their students who were almost finished with college when you first met them. They have fire. And love. And courage. Our conversation spanned a variety of topics — the tattoos they spontaneously got together the afternoon before; [mental] health and new diagnoses; their students, mentor teachers, and student teaching; and reflections on speaking with the rising student teaching interns. *Do you have any tips for classroom management?* my students today asked them, pre-worried about what was to come, what they might not be able to control.

“It’s student-to-student.” The others’ heads were nodding. Mine was too.

“I tried to tell them it doesn’t exist,” I said. “I didn’t say it too much because I didn’t want to scare them off with my slightly more progressive perspectives on teaching.”

We all laugh, soaking each other in. *How much vulnerability is too much vulnerability?* “It’s the same. It’s different if it’s full class, if it’s one-on-one, even across different classes.”

“And time. How much time and space you’ve had for these relationships to grow.” I echoed.

¹¹ They didn’t like it, either, which probably would surprise our administration.

¹² They are very cool. This is important to note.

It is incredibly difficult to accept how much in this life we do not and cannot have control over, like the idea of managing students' behaviors, i.e., classroom management, especially as classroom teachers. Many teachers come to the profession with the comforting idea that they will be able to have anywhere from partial to complete control of their classroom, from curriculum to student activities. However, as many of my students begin their ventures in observing classrooms and student teaching, they begin to worry about their ability to control their classroom spaces. *What do I do if they refuse to do any work?* We can offer scaffolding, provide supports, articulate *the why* of an activity or assignment, and create alternatives to engage our students but, ultimately, we cannot force our students to work. Though I understand this in theory, it has taken me years to arrive at this understanding and, I imagine, will take a number of years to completely settle into the crevices of my bones, to release all need for control with one crack-pop of a tight joint in my shoulder, another in my back. Perhaps it is because of how little space we have to engage somatic understandings that our bodies struggle to release the urge for control, to trust in ourselves, and to trust in our processes. This internal pushback we feel, this anxious need to puppet student bodies¹³—

Think: You can't go to the bathroom; why are you standing up and stretching?; no, you can't drink water in my class; no, you can't eat in my class; take that hat off; put your hood down; you can't wear spaghetti straps! It's distracting. Go to the office; head off the table; why are you out of your seat?? Oh, tissues; earbuds out. No music while writing; only speak to the person next to you; don't process outloud, think quietly. Each of these statements were daily occurrences both when I was in high school and, still, in classrooms I work in as a teaching artist.

—or to push back against both our and our students' bodily needs, only underscores the need to delve more deeply into embodiment in relation to the classroom.

As a writer, a performer, an artist, and a yoga teacher, I have had extensive education on and opportunity to practice scanning my body, identifying my needs and my discomforts, reflecting on what and how bodies communicate feelings, and thinking critically about where I am in relation to other bodies in a space. These experiences have grounded my exploration of

¹³ I have a friend who has spoken to me about being forced into private sessions with their P.E. teacher during lunch because of how their weight was perceived.

embodiment in education spaces alongside the poetics of my body. Artists are intimately acquainted from the knowledge born from our bodies. In her book, *Poetics of the Body: Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elizabeth Bishop, Marilyn Chin, and Marilyn Hacker*, Catherine Cucinella writes, “Bodies become the way we know things and the way we are as well as constituting what we know and who we are. Bodies then circulate within epistemological and ontological realms without belonging exclusively to either” (2010, p. 14). Bodies as a form of knowledge has been a way of knowing and theorizing practiced by many poets in their inquiries through writing:

Of her disabled, crip-body poet and teacher T.A. Greathouse writes, “Before I could accept this body’s fractures,/ I had to unlearn *lame* as the first breath of/ *lament*” (2020).

Of closeted, conflicted queer bodies and relationships, poet and teacher Jason B. Crawford writes, “the answer to your question has always been/ caught in between the stale rot of our kiss./ Behind the bite, your mother calls me your best/ friend in public and you call me your boyfriend/ in private and I am neither/I am both” (2022).

Of nourished (and malnourished) bodies—both literally and metaphorically—poet and teacher Danez Smith writes, “there is no poem greater than feeding someone/ there is no poem wiser than kindness/ there is no poem more important than being good to children/ there is no poem outside love’s violent potential for cruelty” (2024).

Of remembrance, of the nourishment our bodies can provide, poet and teacher Ross Gay writes, “oh, I’ll plant a tree here!—/ and a sudden flush of quince/ and jam enough for months—yes,/ the magic dust our bodies become/ casts spells on the roots” (2015).

Of her indigenous body and relationship with the natural world, poet and teacher Natalie Diaz writes, “The Colorado river is the most endangered river in the United States—also, it is a part of my body./ I carry a river. It is who I am: ‘Aha Makav. This is not a metaphor. When a Mojave says, *Inyech Aha Makavch ithuum*, we are saying our name. We are telling a story of our existence. *The river runs through the middle of my body*” (2020).

In contrast, during my time as a classroom teacher, a teaching artist, an arts education administrator, and a doctoral student, I have observed the silence surrounding bodies and embodiment, as well as an emphasis on leaving whatever is happening in your life “at the door”.

Theorizing the body, *tendering* the body, is of critical importance — as a whole, it has been overwhelmingly absent from teacher education scholarship, particularly when it comes to theorizing the body separate from pedagogical practices. Of teaching and the body, bell hooks (1993) writes:

No one talked about the body in relation to teaching. What did one do with the body in the classroom? Trying to remember the bodies of my professors, I find myself unable to recall them. I hear voices, remember fragmented details but very few whole bodies. Entering the classroom determined to erase the body and give ourselves over more fully to the mind, we show by our beings how deeply we have accepted the assumption that passion has no place in the classroom. Repression and denial make it possible for us to forget and then desperately seek to recover ourselves, our feelings, our passions in some private place---after class. (p. 58)

Psychologist Hillary L. McBride (2021) defines embodiment as “the self in motion, the living, breathing story of who you are and the culture and people you have come from...Embodiment is the conscious knowing of and living as a body, not as a thing distinct from the self or the mind. It is the how, what, why, where, and who of existence” (pp. 18-19). Resmaa Menakem (2017) names bodies as inseparable from our culture and how we reenact history. Negoski and Negoski (2019) speak to the massive detrimental impact that getting “stuck” in an emotion, or caught in the cycle of the stress response, can have to our bodies—mentally, spiritually, and physically, which is something I have experienced first hand and something that has impacted me severely as a student and teacher.

For me, there are multiple bodies. There’s the onion-body, with its sifting, stilted, spoiling layers of pain. There’s the yoga-body, often grounded, focussed on breath, acknowledging rushing thoughts, allowing them to float away. There’s the teaching-body—fae is strong. The teaching body swathes faer students in care, consumes their worries. There’s the artist-researcher-body; she seeks to investigate the new sensations painting her body painful, has an urge to put pen to paper, to scrawl notes and share them, has a deep seated desire for her writings to shout, *I see you*, the way others ’writings have made her feel seen.

Near the end of the Fall 2024 semester, I had the opportunity to celebrate the student teaching interns who I had taught years prior by joining them for their teaching research project presentations. This is an annual event in our department, often featuring an array of food. I came bearing several tins of my pumpkin chocolate chip cookies.

In 2014, I found a pumpkin chocolate chip cookie recipe that I loved and, since that fall, started making and bringing them into my classes at least once a semester. Together, our bodies share space, we eat, and we celebrate. Over the last decade or so, over a dozen students have reached out to me months or years later specifically for the recipe.¹⁴

“Brittany!” I heard a few voices call — I was early, yet.

“Hi, hi, hi!” I tried to manage a wave as I set down the cookie tins, my backpack, and my water.

“Wait, did you bring your cookies??”

I grinned. “Of course! At this point, I feel like it would be blasphemy if I didn’t. But, for real, I couldn’t show up to celebrate y’all without bringing these cookies.”

Students trickled in over the next twenty minutes. Their professor welcomed everyone to the last day of class, walked students through the research project sharing process, and divided the class into two groups.

Despite it being a three-hour sharing, time passed too quickly, as it is wont to do. I felt myself pre-missing them as the clock ticked closer to the end of this gathering. I could have talked with each of them extensively if we had the time. *How is student teaching? How are you enjoying your middle schoolers? Your high school freshman? Your seniors? Tell me about your mentor teacher. Tell me about your field instructor. Do you feel supported? Let me connect you to this community resource, this grant opportunity, this yoga studio, this faculty member.*¹⁵

¹⁴ As I write this, I owe a reply to a previous student who reached out to me via Instagram about these cookies.

¹⁵ Alex Venet (2021) emphasizes the importance of “not only building our own relationships with students but also facilitating relationship building between students and serving as a bridge to other caring adults and resources”

What s been your favorite part? What s been the biggest challenge? Though, let's be honest: there is never enough time. But I was fortunate to have time to sit with many of them.

After our small group finished sharing their teacher research projects, one of my old students came up to me.

"I miss your class. I enjoyed it then but, now, it's probably what I think about the most when I'm teaching."

I had an internal jaw-drop moment. I was honored he was going out of his way to share this with me.

"Especially that moment where I asked you about what we should do if a student is ever sleeping in class."

I started nodding along, grateful that he was willing to share this with me after the fact.

"I was someone who did sleep in class a lot and just remember that some teachers would come over and wake me up just to try to get me to do things. I remember just thinking, *why is this teacher bothering me? Can t they just leave me alone?* It just felt like they gave up on me as a student. Or, like, that being a student was all I was to them."

"Yes, totally. That feeling makes complete sense." I affirmed.

"I remember you asked how I could approach it, or how do you approach it? And you said something like: you start with crouching down to their level and quietly asking them how they are, if anything has been going on, if there is anything they want to talk about and, if nothing is dire that day, maybe just let them rest. And to check in with them, again, the next day."

within students' communities both inside and outside of school (p. 115). Serving as a connection-maker for my students is a key framework for how I approach both teaching and mentorship.

I hummed in agreement. “That’s maybe the most important thing, continuing to check in, reminding them that we care—exactly like you said—about them as a human as well as a student.”

“Yes! Checking in, too. I have a student like this in my student teaching placements. At first, I just let it happen, let him sleep and didn’t say anything. But, once we started doing things, I did go up to him. I asked him quietly about what may be going on. And kept checking in with him. And he started to let me in. And he started to try.”

My smile grew bigger as I shook my head. “That is so awesome.”

“I just wanted to say thank you. I think that he saw I cared about him and his learning and our relationship completely changed.”

No—thank you, I think now. Thank you for your vulnerability in sharing this with me. Thank you for approaching your students with grace.

Grace for myself is a work in progress, a progression that has severely escalated since the onset of my chronic illnesses. Grace is not a quality of overachievers suffering from perfectionism, which I also am. Grace is the quality of a quiet, queer girl who didn’t get to ‘come out ’on a timeline that felt good for her. It’s the quality of a teen who didn’t see herself in any of her teachers in the smalltown, midwest. But how much is too much? This is a favorite question of many of my students. *How much vulnerability is too much vulnerability? How much grace is too much grace?*

In fall 2021, I co-taught a course on crafting teaching practices for pre-service teachers in secondary English. Before the class started, my cat, she was my best friend — one of those soul animals who doesn’t feel like your baby but feels very much your equal — passed away suddenly. She was barely six. I didn’t tell those students this, not during my co-teacher and I’s rants and raves, because of the timing—it was before our first day of class, which would have put my students in a very strange role: *taking care of me? Consoling me?* It is an incredibly complex boundary to balance.

This feeling still tears at me, the cavity of her loss, digging at my roots and, as I write this, it is a little over three years beyond her passing. I can't think of the what or how or why of her passing without my chest tightening or my breath shortening. How do I measure the short time, the little over 3,153,600 minutes, we shared together or the grief that lives in a wooden hollow consuming the center of my chest. Most friends stopped offering sympathy or asking after me—how the ways my body takes up space have changed—a week or so after she passed. The first time I felt immeasurably seen in these past several years was when I picked up Lauren Russell's newest collection of poems, *A window that can neither open nor close: poems, plots, essays*, several months ago. Each section carved a new fret into the balsa wood of my body, and the section on not-Rimbaud, plucked a new chord at the heart of me. Of not-Rimbaud, Russell (2024) writes:

For some reason, I cannot call this cat by his real name. The grief is still too close. Let's call him, for our purposes, Rimbaud. Like the poet Rimbaud he was precocious and bold. His green eyes burned like the traffic lights—always commanding Go Go Go. And we went—from place to place, in our many years together—twelve apartments in three states, one cat and one woman, a singular unit of two, which constituted family, which constituted home. (p. 8)

In this writing studio of unimaginable futures and pasts, I will cry and cry on the fifth anniversary of the death of the cat who was my mooring post. His name was Neruda, not Rimbaud. (p. 56)

Sophie, my love, my best friend, my mooring post across three states and four buildings I called home, waited for me to pass away. My partner and I left for a week in early August 2021 for a long-planned reunion with two dear friends in the Adirondacks. I almost never boarded Sophie because, like many cats, being at home is what gave her the most ease. However, she hadn't been eating well for a few months. Or, rather, eating much at all.¹⁶ And when she did eat, she couldn't keep it down.¹⁷ We had taken her to our vet several times over the course of the spring and

¹⁶ Whenever my partner or I caught her eating her wet food, we would sneak a Snapchat to send the other, assuaged, for a brief moment.

¹⁷ We kept a running tally of days Sophie was able to keep food down. Shortly, we realized that was a system that wouldn't work. Instead, we needed to record each time she threw-up and when during the day.

summer. Our vet's office ordered some bloodwork and took an x-ray or two¹⁸, only to come back with shrugs and recommendations to keep checking in. *There's nothing wrong, as far as we can see.* The day we came back, we went to our vet to pick her up from boarding, waiting in their parking lot in the designated parking space with our masks on, ready for the vet tech to come out with Sophie in her carrier. When we got home, she could barely crawl out of her carrier. We lost her at the MSU Emergency Vet within the hour.

I investigate this grief, how it lives on in my body, in several poems in this manuscript: *Loss upon returning home from visiting the adirondacks, What facts, feelings, needs, or goals are in your head today?, and Rx: shoulds (no generics).* The latter specifically notes the onset of several chronic illnesses in alignment with Sophie's passing. *Even if your vet had caught this, was able to diagnose this, there is nothing you could have done for her.* It was beyond my control. How does my body still find this so hard to believe? If we were several weeks into the course when I lost Sophie, I may have shared this with our students, broadly, during our check-in, if only to let them know the aura of grief I was carrying because it, too, was a lens that impacted how I moved through the day-to-day. It lived and lives, tangled in the blood-roots of my body. There's a chance it was the straw that broke the camel's back, another Jenga block of stress, which finally toppled my body towards chronic illness.

As of July 2023, there were almost 335 people living in the United States of America per the U.S. Census Bureau (United States Census Bureau). Of this number, they report 21.7%, or close to 73 million people, were under the age of 18. The National Health Council (NHC) shares that about 50 million people living in the United States have been reported to have an autoimmune illness, however, "given the complexity of diagnosing these conditions, this number is likely an underestimate. Even more alarming, autoimmunity is reaching epidemic levels, with some studies estimating an increase of 3-12% annually" (Murray, 2024). Alarming, in the same article, Murray writes, "Among test subjects, the prevalence of antinuclear antibodies (ANA), the most common biomarker of autoimmunity, nearly doubled between 1988-2012. In the same study, the prevalence of ANA among adolescents aged 12 to 19 years old increased nearly 300%." Boyer (2019) writes, "if you begin to accept your illness, or even to love it, you worry that you might want to keep it around. You think, when you feel bad, that you will never long for

¹⁸ All very costly and made possible by our credit cards. Someone help fix this system please.

it, but in truth you do, since it provides such clear instruction for existing, brings with it the sharpened optics of life without futurity, the purity of the double vision of any life lived on the line” (p. 80). In other words, I carry with me a new lens for reading the world, a lens that helps me consider, *what is important in the greater scheme of things? What is my body able to do today? How much is too much (returning to a variation of this question, again!)? What do I not want to do—what can t I do—to be able to do what I need to, and what I actually want to.*

This line of thinking is often explained to others through Christine Miserandino’s spoon theory (2003), which was born from a conversation with her friend, a friend who had come with her to countless doctors’ appointments and had been an up-close witness to Miserandino’s day-to-day life living with Lupus. There were a number of spoons on the nearby table and, so, spoons became Miserandino’s metaphor. Miserandino gave her friend twelve spoons and noted that every part of her day costs spoons and when you run out, there are no more in the drawer of your body to choose from. She explains, “the difference in being sick and being healthy is having to make choices or to consciously think about things when the rest of the world doesn’t have to” (p. 1). Miserandino’s friend began to narrate her day and, as she did so, Miserandino would take spoons from her, connecting the spoons to her energy, the possibilities each day has to offer, and, ultimately, to her lack of control of both of these things because of her chronic illness.

I resonate with the metaphor of tokens—each activity or way of engaging with the world can “cost” a different amount of tokens depending on what they entail. Some days you start with less tokens, depending on how many you used the day before. Some days and weeks, you might be in “token debt”, having overspent what your body is capable of. Now, you are on borrowed time with interest, and your body does not have a good, or even passable, interest rate. Every aspect of the day must be evaluated and assessed—a moment where your inner researcher can shine¹⁹—you need to catalog the sensations of your body, read the similarities and differences between yesterday’s body and today’s, and consider the elements of the different environments you may pass through, from temperature to terrain to soundscapes, alongside what your body is able to do today. But first, pat your pockets. How many tokens do you have? Nine? Three? Sonya Huber (2017) writes, “A 2011 study by the Institute of Medicine estimated that 100 million people in this country live in chronic pain, and that number doesn’t include children,

¹⁹ I should note, not all doctors like this. Many of my specialists have dismissed my printed lists of recorded symptoms and family history.

people in the military, in prisons, or in nursing homes, places where pain is also legion. Pain takes over the central nervous system, blotting out the attempt to create metaphors to describe it or a numerical scale on which to rate it. But the burden of pain is also collective and systemic” (pp. 21-22). Let’s move forward, conscientiously.

I know of classroom teachers and professors who ask students who share that they need to miss a class or two because of a death in the family to bring them a program from the funeral service. How would these same educators treat students (and colleagues) with chronic illnesses (which we now know are a large and vastly underreported portion of our population in the United States)? If they are ill but not diagnosed yet, will the professors offer them grace, accommodations, time? Is it equitable to ask our students, to ask ourselves, to leave our life experiences, our challenges, our struggles at the door?

Of the people currently living with autoimmune diseases—unfortunately, this research still overwhelmingly lives in binary gender categorizations—about 80% are categorized as women (Autoimmune Association, N.D.). The first time my ANA came back positive was in August of 2022. It was a fight to convince the doctors at Michigan State University (MSU) Student Health to order blood work. After my first appointment, I decided I needed to switch doctors—my first physician refused to believe my symptoms were related to anything other than depression and anxiety. The second doctor I saw felt similarly, dismissing my worries and offering what I’m sure he thought were warm, but flippant, remarks. Instead, he asked if anything marked had happened the year before, when I first noticed symptoms, any kind of trauma.²⁰

However, after enough repeated asking—pleading? asking through tears?—he submitted bloodwork on my behalf. When the labs came back, when I saw the results (unsurprised that there were flags but also grateful—this will be a running theme), when I returned for a follow-up appointment with him, he congratulated himself, *It s something autoimmune, of course*, and writes me a referral to the first of many specialists I would begin seeing over the next few years and, still, today.

What does my experience with chronic illness mean for my teaching? It means *tendering*. Poet and educator Natalie Diaz shares, “Isn’t that the commitment or promise we’re making, is that the language I’m showing you is in some way the promise of my body arriving to be in

²⁰ Sophie did not come to mind then, but she did later and I kept her for myself—one thing I could control.

conversation with you...our bodies are affecting one another” (2020). It means, even more than before, I take teaching class by class. From the beginning of our work together, I invite students to be in conversation with me about the intersection of their school lives, work lives, and health needs. In my classes, I have started to share samples and tastings of my chronic illnesses, particularly during our check-ins. These offerings are part of my journey towards making space for our full selves and the bodily experiences that impact our ability to exist with and engage in this work. We do a check-in at the start of each class, what I call the head and the heart check-in: *What is something you haven't been able to stop thinking about? What is something you are looking forward to in the future (from after class to months from now) or want to celebrate?*²¹ If I have a doctor's appointment coming up that I'm nervous about, I will share this. If I'm having a high-pain day that is blitzing my brain's ability to focus, I will share that—it is important for my students to know as it impacts how my body wears my face. What I don't do is share specifics, I share the kinds of illnesses I navigate, or the kinds of procedures and treatments I am undergoing.

After our dedicated check-in time, which allows me to gauge where each student is at, I adjust what follows accordingly, when needed. Our check-in is followed up with announcements—not just of professional opportunities or scholarships, but also of upcoming wellness, arts, and cultural events sponsored by the university and local community.

Tendering the classroom and the body necessitates holding forth softness.

Intentionally *tendering the classroom and the body* can look like taking days away from class when our health calls for it, both students and teachers, and not being penalized for this necessary rest—just be in dialogue with one another.

Tendering the classroom and the body can look like offering an invitation to propose new submission dates for papers or projects beforehand, whether it be because of illness, doctors appointments, or the collision of several different class assignments, and reminding students of this invitation as needed.

²¹ This past summer, a previous student reached out to me on social media. She wrote, “I think you'd be happy to know that at least once a week our cohort group chat talks about something we are looking forward to and something we can't stop thinking about hehe”.

Tendering the classroom and the body necessitates checking in, treating our whole students, noticing when to support the rest of their bodies and minds.

Tendering the classroom and the body can look like sharing your experiences, from the day to day, of being in a body. Modeling this kind of vulnerability is an offering, *a tendering*, in and of itself that invites them to do the same, if they choose. Tendering the classroom and the body does not look like asking your students to do something you are not willing to do.

Tendering the classroom and the body can look like holding forth nourishment, sharing with students that they can both eat and drink in the classroom space and reminding yourself that you might need too, as well. Food and drink only supports our ability to engage in learning.

Tendering the classroom and the body necessitates offering your students grace and don't stop there—offer yourself grace, too.

So far, unanimously, my students have offered me grace in turn. Even with these once-in-a-while, small moments of sharing, students have been more forthcoming with me and, what I can say from my decade of teaching, is many more of our students experience chronic pain and chronic illnesses than you would expect. For those who don't, it is very likely someone they love is experiencing chronic pain, illness, and/or disability. What reverberations might this have on the body? The excruciating fact of knowing someone you love is often or always in pain? The labor of caretaking for either/both others and ourselves? What impact might it have when you combine these experiences with a classroom whose ethos is to leave everything at the door? Our experiences of illness and pain, whether our own or those of the people we love, live within and resound throughout our bodies.

Many of my students have taken me up on my offer to propose a slightly different deadline for a paper or project before it is due because of the collision of other assignments, part-time jobs to pay towards their six-figure public university debt, medical appointments, and the needs of their family members. What I say to them at the beginning of the semester, "This is

what it is like at work. This is what it was like for me when I was working at an arts education nonprofit. Certain tasks will have a higher priority. If dedicating time and effort to this task will impact other responsibilities, you check in with your supervisor and walk them through the demands of this task and what the task needs in order to be completed. Almost always, you and your supervisor decide which tasks can be delayed and collaborate on new dates to complete other tasks by. This is an important skill that we flex every day.” And hope they take me up on it.

At Moka & Co, the four of us were a percussive orchestra, rattling our iced beverages, trying to eke out a few last delicious sips.

“I’ve been learning about myself more this year.”

“Yeah!”

“Like, I know I have undiagnosed ADHD. I’ve known that for a while. But I think I may be autistic?”

“Tiktok?” I asked.

“Yes!” There are murmurs of assent. “I mean, that’s where I started to learn about it but I’ve been looking into it more on my own...and yeah. It’s helped me understand more about myself. Why certain things were maybe hard? Or, at least, harder for me?”

“That’s a big deal,” I affirmed. “It’s definitely something to keep digging into. A few of my friends have recently realized that they are autistic and have talked about how incredibly validating it’s been to understand this about themselves, their bodies, and their minds.”

“Right?? It’s also made me think more about my students, how many of the things they are experiencing they might not have words for or even understand. And how I could set up my classroom to accommodate that.”

“How you could offer them grace?” I smiled.

“Exactly.”

They are and are going to be such great teachers.

“Be sure to give yourself some, too.”

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Ache: Intersectional feminist press exploring illness, health, bodies & pain: The Blizzard of 2016 ranked as the fourth largest snowfall in Philadelphia history.

Anodyne Magazine: Rx: shoulds (no generics).

Bi All Accounts: Bi premonitions; I can't remember the photo

Excessive Bodies: A Journal of Artistic and Critical Fat Praxis and World Making: The first time I asked for a seatbelt extender.

Genrepunk Magazine: SCHEDULE [non-teaching days]

Grey Coven Publishing: In seeking compassion/ Ace of cups, My spirit wants/ The lovers

Hole in the Head Review: The girls I grew up with were slick, The store is closed now

Ilanot Review: I have been to three psychics.

Journal of Language & Literacy Education: Pre-show prep list

Months to Years: Loss upon returning home from visiting the Adirondacks with friends

Rougarou: A Journal of Arts and Literature: New England Secrets, When I Storytell Myself

Troublemaker Firestarter: Skintimate

Wild Roof Journal: Towards Softness

NOTES

“The girls I grew up with were slick”: This poem is after Karyna McGlynn’s “The Girls I Grew Up with Were Hard” in *50 Things Kate Bush Taught Me About the Multiverse* (Sarabande Books, 2022).

“The Blizzard of 2016 ranked as the fourth largest snowfall in Philadelphia history”: The epigraph for this poem is from Sara Ahmed’s *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way* (Seal Press, 2023).

“A pilgrimage towards friendship, queered”: The epigraph for this poem is from Sir BabyGirl’s “Haunted House,” which is on his album “Crush on Me” (2019).

“Before therapy”: The epigraph for this poem is from Raechel Anne Jolie’s *Rust Belt Femme* (Belt Publishing, 2020).

“Writing a daily medical note, at the request of my gynecologist”: The epigraph and citation in this poem are from Jennifer Militello’s poem, “Autobiography Toward a Study of the Thousand Wounds,” which is in her collection *Body Thesaurus* (North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2013).

“The Purgatory Lexicon”: This poem is after Kay Ulanday Barrett’s “The Get Well Lexicon,” (in *More Than Organs*; Sibling Rivalry Press, LLC; 2020) which is after Darlene Laguna’s “Updates”.

“Appointment follow-up, request for care, and response re: steroids”: This poem is a burning haibun after torrin a. greathouse’s poem “Burning Haibun”.

“The world has a habit of ending”: The first line of this poem is borrowed from the poem “In the Meantime,” written by Max Garland.

“On Reading Braving the Body”: This poem is referring to a poetry anthology, *Braving the Body*, edited by Nicole Callihan, Pichchenda Bao, and Jennifer Franklin (Small Harbor Publishing, 2024).

“A room of our own”: The epigraph for this poem is from Kelly Barnhill’s *When Women Were Dragons* (Doubleday, 2022).