

The Broken Body

HELEN GILDFIND

As she swims each lap, she looks out through the fogged planes of glass into the lifting dark of the midwinter morning. She can see the refinery in full: it is small, centred perfectly in the metal-framed glass walls. A kilometre away, maybe two, it ghosts and glitters in a self-made steam of white. High above its cloud-spewing baths, something ignites from steeples of steel. She knows that in the earliest hours of the morning these flames will triple in size, lashing fire at the stars. All of this—these stretching geometries of light, these brutal balls of fire—gives her something to swim towards.

Slowly, her body moves backwards into the long steel tube. The blinding lights of the room disappear as she enters the tunnel. They should have told her to close her eyes. Too late. A humiliating drench of panic. A second to notice the strip lighting along the tunnel's roof. Just like the aisle lights in aeroplanes, she thinks, eyes clenched shut—the ones that lead to safety when there's a crash. She tries to be wry and ironic, detached, crafting the analogy. She can't—she is in a coffin.

They told her not to worry, then they gave her a panic button. It looks like the rubber bulb of a turkey-baster, a stupid thing dangling off a tube, but she clutches it hard against the knobbed plane between her breasts. She tries to relax, but her eyelids keep tightening. She can't talk away the straightjacket of steel that surrounds her.

I can't sit up. I'm trapped. I'm trapped.

Jackhammers of noise. Blunt blasts and, behind them, the heavy hum of massive magnets moving up and down and around her body, waves of energy, stroking her insides.

Amazing, she thinks, amazing. This is the mantra against panic she recited years ago when a dentist drilled and hammered all of her wisdoms out of her head. Good girl, he'd said. Good girl. It had been amazing, being wide awake and without pain, but able to feel the heave and haul of bone against gum as the man levered roots out of her jaw with garden-variety pliers. She'd gone home thrilled at her bravery, ecstatic, till she collapsed in bed vomiting bile-blackened blood, her mind suddenly assaulted by new-born horror-movie memories.

Now she recognises that same panic, realises it is not her own but that of the skin and

the bone, the terror of a body in danger. She could be a dog, a spider, a rat in a trap.

The radiographer, tired and indifferent (for she'd told him that no, she wasn't claustrophobic), says, Not long now, hon.

Gunshot of stutters. The click, click, clicking of a giant tongue.

Amazing, how this noise knows how to find a wound in the bone, a tear in the tissue, a spill of stuff, strangling nerves. The machine's hum finally cools to silence. Smooth, slow, her bed rolls back into the fluorescent room.

Good girl, the radiographer says. He leans over her, startled. Are you okay?

She nods, horrified at the tears that she can suddenly feel on her face and damp behind her ears.

He helps her wince her way to an upright, sitting position. He helps her off the table. He is so gentle, but iron brands of pain sear her back, hips, legs.

Okay?

She nods, smiles.

Alone, struggling to dress, she cannot understand it. She is no longer trapped in the machine, but the animal panic remains, pulsing through her. I'm trapped. I'm trapped. There is no voice now telling her it will all end soon. No panic button to press if it all gets too much.

Every morning she walks carefully down the cool tiles, rough-ridged against slipping. As she steps into the blue she thinks, Here, I am beautiful. Here, we are all beautiful.

Amoebic memories awaken, joyful, pulling her under.

Weight lifts from her body and with it the pain lifts too.

She was never taught to swim. The badly timed rolling spit of her body leaves her breathing in lungfuls of chlorine. It is a triumph to get from one end of the pool to the other, where she stops, sculling space. Then, breath restored, she goes back under and struggles to the other side. She looks left and right as she moves along, and this is the best bit, her reward for trying: all around her is the underblanket privacy of headless bodies, everyone enclosed by—and exposed in—the same shared water. As intimate as sex, she thinks.

There's the squad swimmer in the fast lane, smoothed to Ken doll perfection by the water-light. There, in the slow lane, that huge woman who bobs like a boat: underneath, the dry-land wobble of her dimpled thighs and belly and breasts settles to a slow-motion grace. There's the man whose loose skeins of black-haired skin signal a once-gross body. He turns a perfect pirouette at the end of each length. In the corner, away from everyone, a short, stout woman cycles her legs into nothingness, the frills of her skirted swimsuit sigh around her like the wings of a mantra ray.

She begins another lap, the last for today. In her lane, coming towards her, is the man whose dry-land hand flips and flops uselessly at the end of his arm. She can hear it, now, splashing the surface. Underneath, she watches as water meets the limp flesh,

Fiction

resisting it so that the poor dead fingers glide smoothly through the blue, a man-fin.

This underwater watching reminds her of something she once saw on television: three elephants swimming across a lake. First, the camera shot them from above the water: stubbled heads breached the surface, ridiculous trunks spluttered for air. Then they were filmed from below. The sun lit a halo above them, glimmering, twinkling, each huge body a silhouette dancing in silence. The camera moved up, tracing the smoothed wrinkled planes of their bellies, the slow rotations of their tree-trunk legs that somehow pushed them steadily along. Such clumsiness made graceful, such power turned gentle, tonnes of absurd design suddenly explained.

Standing up in the water, looking around, she knows it is true. Here, we are all beautiful. She inches up the tiled stairs, and back into a world of weight.

In Suite 101, a beige-suited man reclines in a high-backed leather chair. His head is cradled in his hands; one ankle rests on his other knee. He smiles at her. His eyes are the palest of greens, as cool as granite.

She stands on the other side of his desk, smiles and tries not to look at the folds and creases of his expensively dressed crotch.

He gets up, shakes her hand and asks her to lie on the bed. He lifts her legs, one at a time. He checks her reflexes. He tells her to roll on her side. He lifts her skirt. He pricks a pin around her buttocks and lower back. Can you feel that? he says. He pricks the pin around her inner thighs and labia. Can you feel that?

He makes her get off the bed and watches as she tippy-toes around the room.

Good, he says. Good girl.

He returns to his desk and puts her MRI disk into his computer. She watches his blank face as he studies her insides. What a portrait, she thinks, straightening her clothes.

She wanders to the wall furthest from the surgeon's desk. Here, dozens of children's drawings compete for space, shouting Thank you! in rainbows of crayon, pencil and texta. There's a photo of a little boy with half of his shining black hair shaved off. A stretch of fresh and swollen stitches arc back in a neat line from his brow. The boy grins.

She turns and sits at the other side of the surgeon's desk.

Finally he looks up and shakes his head: a disappointed schoolteacher. Well, he says. He casually slides something across the polished surface at her. It is cool and heavy and fits in the palm of her hand. It looks like something from a hardware store, an elaborate door hinge: smoothed metal and moulded plastic; nuts and bolts.

He begins to explain, making a cutting gesture across his own belly. He retrieves the object from her and pushes it into himself, into the imaginary gash. He jiggles the thing about, showing her where it would sit and how it would move.

You'd get a bit of a scar. He stretches two fingers taut across his gut. Same as from

a caesarean. He shrugs. He leans back, ankle on knee, head cradled.

Again, she doesn't know where to look. She directs her questions to the children's Thank-yous. I thought, she says, that bodies were designed to heal themselves.

He squints across the table at her. The spring sun melts the granite of his eyes to water, an algal bloom, glowing. How much of your life does this affect? he asks, pointing at the images on his screen.

Everything, she says.

Everything, he repeats. Work? Driving? Dressing? Sleep?

She nods.

Leisure? All of the things you like to do?

She nods.

Relationships? Sex?

She stares at him.

He holds up the hardware in front of her, as if she has not seen it for what it is. This, he says, is designed. Bodies are not. He looks at her, and smiles. If bodies healed themselves, I'd be out of a job, wouldn't I?

She picks up the prosthesis and traces her fingers over its cool, intricate surfaces. In a way, it is a beautiful thing to build into one's body. Amazing. Amazing. Amazing.

She looks around the room once more, avoiding his face because she knows she is about to cry. She recognises, vaguely, that the pens and the mouse pad and the notebooks on his desk each bear the same name as that inscribed on the object in her hand.

Look, if you don't do this, he says, plucking the prosthesis from her and admiring it in the light, you will end up crippled. You will be in pain for the rest of your life.

Her face rushes red. Tears pluck. She can't tell whether it is fury or fear storming the salt and the blood inside her.

He gets up. He shakes her hand at the door, dismisses her.

By the time she gets home a slow panic pulses steadily through her. She Googles the neurosurgeon's name. He has his own website. His face grins out from the homepage, a car salesman in mint-coloured scrubs. His services are listed down one side of the screen: craniotomy, lobectomy, discectomy, laminectomy, vertebroctomy, discography, fusion, corpectomy. She clicks on Complications: infection, bleeding, paralysis, stroke, DVT, death. She finds a link to his Hobbies: kids and dogs and tennis; footy and violin; Christianity. She stares, but she cannot assess what she is looking at (a Christian man? A belief in God? A belief he's God?). She has no idea now what to make of anything.

She has never been to a gym, only to the pool next door. She is waiting for an instructor to come and give her some advice. She stands in a corner, self-conscious in tight black pants. Across the room a huge poster hangs down from the ceiling,

Fiction

rippling in the draft from the air-conditioning. On it, a petite bronzed girl beats gloved fists into a boxing bag. Beneath her, in a fire of red letters: Empower Yourself!

All of the lower walls of the gym are made of glass. On one side the glass is fogged from the swimming pool. Two other walls face onto the car park and the street. The remaining glass wall faces the refinery. All of the treadmills are lined up in rows, facing the sunburnt, steel-gripped horizon.

Although the room is huge, it seems to be full of people, all of them running. No-one looks outside. Instead, everyone looks up at the televisions silently flashing above the window. Teletext streams across the screens. Dance music palpitates, cutting through everything. A hard white light blasts in from the street, detailing every blotch and line and flinch in people's faces. Sheens of sweat shine from every stretch of flesh, and there is nothing to soften the savage thuds of each body's jerk and jolt: weight colliding, again and again, into steel and rubber.

A fat man walks on a machine near the end of a row of treadmills. He stares up at the televisions. A painful V of sweat creeps down his front and back. Once in a while his feet trip over themselves, confused by the false earth moving beneath them. Most of the treadmills are occupied, except for those closest to him. He is a horror of obesity.

She focuses on the good-looking couple at the far side of the room. They run next to each other on the treadmills, pushing themselves and each other harder, harder, *harder!* The more she stares the more they look like automatons: strange machines upon strange machines. Watching them, her throat tightens with the terror of the archetypal nightmare: hunted, running; getting nowhere.

Outside, the late-summer dust has blasted the refinery to a dull flatness, a backdrop to a cheap movie. Inside, the teletext streams on and on.

The fat man presses a button on his treadmill and begins to jog. He stares down at his feet. Two fingers of one hand touch the side rail, steadying him. His other arm beats time at his side, the fat flapping like the plucked wing of an enormous turkey.

Someone taps her on the shoulder. The instructor looks about eighteen. She stares at the boils blistering on the white clammy skin of his neck. His cheeks are scarlet, his forehead dripping.

He smiles but he doesn't meet her eye. He begins to tell her what he can offer her. He speaks to a space over her shoulder, looking out through the haze at the refinery.

She nods, then she is interrupting, apologising, turning and leaving him behind.

Ten minutes later she is swimming across the blue. The only sound in her ears, her breathing.

She borrows more money and pays to see two more private surgeons. They are both angered by Green Eyes' advice. They both tell her to ignore it, and to wait and see if she gets better on her own. Bodies heal themselves, they say, most of the time. They

are too busy to answer her questions. They give her some pamphlets telling her how to get better. One pamphlet recommends that she do exactly what the other warns her not to.

She goes to the public hospital and asks when she'll be able to discuss her scan with one of the surgeons. The receptionist shrugs: a letter will come in the mail.

She goes to a physiotherapist. That's bad, the young woman says, looking up from the scan. That's the worst I've *ever* seen. She recommends an eight-week course of one-on-one Pilates. She explains the physiology of the problem, whipping a white snake of spine in the air. You must, she says, reactivate your *transversus abdominis*. She stands up, waving the spine like a wand as she lifts her top. She points to her stomach. It's like a girdle, yeah? Look, she says, I'm clenching it ... now. The expression drops from the physio's face. A quiver moves across her tight flat stomach. See? She sits down again. You've gotta get onto this right away, she says, before they butcher you up. She throws the naked spine across the room, where it clatters into a basket of body parts.

She goes to a chiropractor, who stands her up, lies her down and tells her it's really her hips that are the problem. They're misaligned, he says, so all of you is misaligned, top to toe. Cause and effect. You need realigning, he says, nodding to himself, and I'm just the man to do it! He pats her hand. Don't worry. He recommends two appointments per week.

She goes back to her GP. He also tells her to ignore Green Eyes. She asks lots of questions about worst-case scenarios. He tells her to keep away from Google. He shrugs his shoulders about the gym, the physio, the chiro, the neurosurgeon. No-one really knows, he says. Just take it easy, listen to your body, wait and see.

For how long?

Again, he shrugs. Till it's lots better, or lots worse. He stares at her flushed face.

I can't tell any more, she says, what's pain and what's fear.

He has known her since she was two blue lines on a pee-wetted stick. Don't worry, he says, looking worried. He reaches for his prescription pad. Though he's just told her to listen to her body, he offers her the one thing he can: chemical gags; painkillers, lots of them, whatever she wants.

Alone at home, not sure what to do—and therefore doing nothing—the net lures her in. She is Googling for a solution, reassurance. She finds horror stories, as she knew she would. She finds testimonies for and against every product, exercise and medical discipline. Everywhere, threats and promises. Everywhere, despair and hopelessness—digital screams into the ether.

She swims. The novelty has worn off. She resents how her skin and hair have dried up, how she always smells of chlorine. She's been swimming for months, but still she struggles for breath. Perhaps, she thinks, it's an anxiety thing, a reaction to the com-

Fiction

munality of the water, to the webs of phlegm floating by like strange, self-annihilating jellyfish. She is ingesting what the others leave behind.

One day, as she nears the end of her lane, she sees the bruised, ulcerated legs of an old, old man. Gnarled red corals, they plant him to the floor of the pool. Slowly, painfully, he tries to raise himself up and down on his toes. Through the water-light, she stares at the delicate scales of skin floating out from his decaying legs, following his movement. We are all beautiful, she recites. She watches one of the scales dislodge and arc towards her, propelled by the ripples of his movement, resisting the ripple of hers.

She stands.

He winks at her. Use it or lose it, eh, love? He openly admires her breasts, stomach, thighs.

She smiles, backs away, heads straight for the change-room showers.

The day of her hospital appointment finally comes. She does not know if the man speaking to her is an intern, a registrar or a surgeon. Although she has spent eight months waiting and seeing, he flicks through her scans and tells her she must wait and see.

Afterwards, she wanders the hospital looking for a way out. Somehow, she finds herself in intensive care. She panics as the images imprint: a face, sunk into plaster (Trapped, Trapped); a woman wired into the walls (Amazing, Amazing); dark stains on a stretch of white (As intimate as sex).

In the hospital cafeteria she tries to calm down.

A teenage boy sits near her. Pieces of fabric, plastic and foam are strapped across his head, snug, like a wrestler's helmet. An older couple joins him. As they organise themselves, the boy carefully unbuckles his helmet and dumps it on the table. Silver rivers lace through the intricate topography of lumps and bumps that undulate across his scalp. He scratches at the scrubs of hair that have begun to grow in the shorn softness between the scars.

He chugs down his soft drink, all at once. He burps.

His mother looks up, sharply, but his giggling gets her laughing too. She makes to slap him.

Not the head! He laughs. Not the head!

People turn to look. Quickly, they look away.

The boy's fingers fiddle with his helmet as his eyes wander the cafeteria. For a second, his gaze meets hers. From him, half a smile, half a shrug. He begins to flush. He looks back down at his hands on the table. He can't be older than sixteen, half her age.

She gathers her things, turns and walks out into the autumn warmth of the mid-day.

Winter again, long dark mornings. She rests at the end of a lap, looking out at the fog-blurred lights of the refinery. It is a terrible beauty.

She breathes easily now. The webs of hair, the ghosts of spit and the spawn-clouds of shed skin no longer bother her. Head under, watching, she lets it all pass by and through her. None of it has harmed her yet.

The limp-handed man overtakes her. He is a better swimmer than she'll ever be. She watches his hands, one good, one bad, as they arc through the water with equal grace, both of them pulling him along. Beautiful. He swims ahead of her. She swims in his wake. In this tunnel of bubbles that he has given her, the resistance of the water seems to disappear altogether. She is weightless.

Nothing, she thinks, no-one, will ever make us sink. **M**