

The Thing with Feathers by Chloë M. Robinson

How fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! How short his time! Consequently how poor will his products be, compared with those accumulated by nature during whole geological periods. Can we wonder, then, that nature's productions should be far 'truer' in character than man's productions... and should plainly bear the stamp of higher workmanship?"

From page 65 of *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin, 1859

It was an abrupt event, and it deserves an abrupt introduction: I was seventeen years old when I survived a lightning strike. We were on a church camping trip, a large group that included my dad and younger sister. The first night at camp, over fifty teenagers were playing lawn games on a grassy field after dinner. It had been drizzling on and off that day, and we were excited to take advantage of the momentarily clear skies. At about 7:45 p.m., I was sitting under a tree with my dad, trying to set up a croquet set for everyone to use. Dad couldn't believe someone had packed a set, since croquet hadn't been popular since at least the seventies—what if we'd been setting up another lawn game, like badminton or ladderball? Without warning, a bolt of lightning struck the top of the tree, traveled to the ground, and arced through the roots to Dad and me. Somehow, we were the path of least resistance—not the lightning rod, metal pavilions, or the open body of water within five hundred feet of that tree.

The deafening noise, intense light, and boom of pressure stunned everyone on the field. Dave, a family friend and physician's assistant, was immediately on the scene. He cleared my airway and forced my breathing, so I was quickly out of danger. I regained consciousness within ten minutes, and awoke to my frantic sister and an EMT sitting by my side. My head swam and my eyelids sagged, but they shook my shoulders and told me not to go back to sleep. I didn't believe them when they told me I was hit by lightning.

In miracle time, I was loaded onto the first ambulance and taken to the emergency room. There, a bald nurse took my vitals. In my delirium, I thought he was my dad. I didn't realize Dad had been hit by lightning, too. Dave later admitted that he thought Dad had died on impact. The first responders moved him apart from the group and performed CPR for over three minutes. He was defibrillated several times in the emergency room. We were flown in separate helicopters to

a larger hospital one hundred and twenty miles away, the only one with a burn unit equipped to handle our injuries. The doctors treated my burns and concussion, then checked for internal injuries. To the amazement of the staff, I left the burn unit two days later with only second degree topical burns and a busted eardrum.¹ They'd never seen two people survive such a severe¹ lightning strike with relatively no permanent damage. My hair was the only real casualty. They'd shaved off a few areas to treat burns, and what remained was so fried that it was breaking off in clumps. My youngest sister shaved it all off for me in the hospital bathroom.

The therapist diagnosed me with acute stress disorder and moderate depression. We pinpointed triggers for my panic attacks—tasers, fireworks, rainclouds. Even polite comments, like “I bet you had a memorable summer!” or “You look great without hair!”, sent me down a dark spiral. It wasn't the physical pain that I hated remembering. It was the way I screamed when they said Dad didn't have a heartbeat, and my sister's sobs when I first came to. It's a singular feeling, a panic attack; a sudden weightlessness in my nerves, like a shift in barometric pressure, signals its arrival. I go numb in the fingers and toes. My breathing quickens. Then I'm a spectator in a dark movie theater, rewatching the events of that day and observing the tears and tremors that wrack my body. The panic isn't touching *me*, it's touching the body. Through the storm I retain the presence of mind to think, “This occurred in the past, not the present. I could stop thinking about this if I wanted.” It always passes as suddenly as it arrived.

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Ballet was my childhood sport. My parents first enrolled me in classes at age three after I'd begged for a full year.² Maybe I was lured in by the ballerina-as-ultimate-performance-of-femininity thing, but I found great joy in my years as a dancer. Dancing was so much more interesting than other sports. Running the mile in P.E. was ten minutes of thuds and wheezes, but starting class with a plié/tendu combination was ten minutes of rapid-fire problem-solving (shoulders down elbows round fingers soft ribs zipped chin lifted feet even back straight toes

¹ Did you know otolaryngologists can patch up lingering holes in the eardrum with a skin graft from the patient's own ear canal? The surgery is performed with an endoscope and necessitates the total blockage of pressure and fluids from the patient's reconstructed eardrum.

² Growing up, my parents' rule was that each kid could choose one sport and one instrument to play per school year. New extracurriculars could wait until after we'd performed in spring recitals/musicals/playoffs/etc. In seventh grade, I was shocked to see a couple girls my age playing on both the volleyball *and* soccer teams; I assumed the one-sport per-year thing held true in other families, too.

long hips neutral knees strong eyes focused smile gentle). I loved marrying the minutia of physical technique with musical expression. Ballet filled both my body and my brain.

The best part was performing. I attended small ballet schools, but they always staged a year-end show in June (i.e. rented out a middle school theater and invited grandparents to snap photos). I remember one lively performance—first grade?—where my class wore navy blue berets, star-studded dresses, and whistles on strings around our necks. We paraded around the stage to “Colonel Bogey’s March” with our feet in sixth position, tooting our whistles along to the chipper melody. Another year we wore tiaras and baby blue dresses that fell just below the knee à la Balanchine’s *Serenade*. That dance involved lots of arabesques and waltz turns, movements exaggerated by the flowing skirts. My first tutu at age nine was a dream come true—I was a diamond fairy in Act III of *Sleeping Beauty*, so the bodice was milky crushed velvet studded with silver gems.³ Even my aunts and uncles came to see me perform that year.

Luckily, I understood from a young age that ballet was just a thrilling hobby, not a lifestyle. I had no illusions of moving to New York and becoming a professional dancer; ten hours of class each week were plenty of fun for me. My teachers used ballet to build confidence in young girls and create a happy community, not to give them eating disorders to create a perfectly identical corps de ballet, as is sadly the case in many pre-professional ballet schools.⁴ Even when I was a gangly teenager, I felt proud to present my body on stage. I reveled in my roles as Carabosse in *Sleeping Beauty*, Carlotta Grisi in *Pas de Quatre*, and Odette in *Swan Lake*. I’d worked long and hard to build my strength, my endurance, and my artistry. Plus, I got to wear a fabulous dress! Just look at me go!

I finally quit ballet lessons at age nineteen, when I enrolled in an advanced pointe class as a college freshman and was demoted to the intermediate technique class after the first week. My heart was a dancer’s, but I didn’t look like a ballerina. Fifteen years of joyful training did not rearrange my ankle bones for the perfect bevel, nor did it slim my legs to blend into the bony forest of a corps de ballet. I had twice the technique experience as the intermediate girls, but my body was simply not built like those of the advanced pointe students. Quitting then was the right

³ Act III is Aurora’s wedding to the prince, so various fairies and fairy-tale characters make appearances and take their respective three minutes to dance for the court. In our staging, I played one of the precious stone fairies (diamonds, sapphires and rubies) who did nothing for the plot besides pop out from the wings and do a couple pirouettes in celebration.

⁴ Chloe Angyal, *Turning Pointe: How a New Generation of Dancers Is Saving Ballet from Itself* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021), 112.

decision, as I found my assigned class to be neither as exciting nor as challenging as I needed. As Dr. Marcia Millman, social psychologist at UCSC, once wrote, “human potential and happiness are tragically wasted by our society’s emphasis on physical beauty.”⁵ In other words, I wasn’t beautiful in the right way to enjoy dancing en pointe. The sentiment stuck; I haven’t put on my pointe shoes since.

Was it appropriate for that professor to dismiss me from the advanced pointe class? I think so. Performing artists’ bodies are not entirely their own; beauty is an understandable emphasis for an art so disciplined as ballet. That class curriculum was designed to prepare students to join the university’s ballet company, earn a minor in ballet, then embark on successful careers in dance. I wanted none of those outcomes for myself; ten hours of class each week were still plenty of fun for me! The other girls, however, were past the point of having fun. Frankly, my body next to theirs at the barre took too much of the attention they needed from our professor. As discouraging as the dismissal was, it represented the boundary that every mature dancer faces between dedication and recreation. Neither my body nor my mind lent themselves to a dedicated relationship with ballet, and the university didn’t offer recreational classes to my liking, so that was that.⁶ But what if I’d had a different body—one with high arches, long limbs, elastic bones, no curves or body fat but somehow also the muscle of an Olympic swimmer?⁷ The type of body we Americans pretend can be achieved by anyone who trains hard and watches their diet. Would I still have chosen to quit ballet, or would the two roads have even diverged at that point? A professional ballerina has a unique relationship with her body, since her financial success hinges almost entirely on the body’s appearance and ability. Megan Fairchild, principal dancer at New York City Ballet, writes that “to be your most successful, you need to be in peak physical shape. It’s about lean muscle, stamina, and strength, and you do have to eat and exercise in a certain way to get there.”⁸ She’s right—a career in dance demands work and resilience. A quick internet search of the phrase “how to get a ballerina body” recommends running six miles a week, four hours of weekly Pilates, weightlifting, lean proteins, complex carbohydrates, and a

⁵ Marcia Millman, *Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980), 205.

⁶ The latest estimate is that only 2-3% of people who take ballet classes become professional dancers.

⁷ ScienceDaily, “Ballet Dancers Are Fitter Than International Swimmers, Study Finds,” last modified October 23, 2008, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/10/081022073916.htm>.

⁸ Megan Fairchild, *The Ballerina Mindset: How to Protect Your Mental Health While Striving for Excellence* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021), 51.

gallon of water each day—all while weighing less than one-hundred and twenty pounds.⁹ Some dancers would say that they find great meaning in sacrificing their bodies to the art form, in sharing their bodies with a rapt audience, in touching the pinnacle of physical performance. Of course, the price of this sacrifice is often injury or disability that forces dancers' relatively early retirement from performing.

Lauren Fadeley Veyette, one of these early retirees manipulated by diet culture, was accepted to the School of American Ballet at age sixteen, then promoted to apprentice at New York City Ballet a year later. She recalls her teachers in those years telling her she needed to lose weight, but “they never told me when I looked good again, so I kind of went too far.” She guesses that her extreme weight loss was the reason she was promoted to the company so quickly, but that it also precipitated an on-stage fracture at age eighteen. “Her weight had yo-yoed as a result of crash dieting; at the time of the injury, she remembers, she was ‘too thin for myself’—that is, unnaturally thin for her frame. She rolled her ankle, as so many pointe dancers do, ‘and it just broke my whole first metatarsal...’” Fadeley Veyette spent the next several months on crutches, and, unable to dance, naturally gained weight. “The company let her know in no uncertain terms that it was unacceptable. ‘I was literally in a boot and crutches,’ she remembers, ‘and they were like, ‘we can’t put you onstage like that.’ And I said, ‘I know, I can’t walk,’ and they were like, ‘No, the way your body looks.’ They didn’t care that I was injured. It was how I looked physically.’” She left the company later that year.¹⁰

Like me, Lauren Fadeley Veyette chose to leave ballet, not to struggle in a company with no place for bodies that could not exist within its strict and unrealistic beauty standards. I respect her for reclaiming her body as her own, for honoring its health. Her decision had a happy outcome. After taking four years off to attend college, Fadeley Veyette performed again with Pennsylvania Ballet for fifteen years and now works as the principal director of Kansas City Ballet. Even though she didn't fix conditions at New York City Ballet, she found space for her body in the dancing she loved. But how many other potential ballerinas don't find space for their natural bodies? How many teenage girls choose to stay in those companies, to contort and conform to such narrow expectations?

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⁹ u/Aholahi. “Ballerina Bod.” Reddit. Posted in r/xxfitness, July 12, 2015. https://www.reddit.com/r/xxfitness/comments/3bnfha/ballerina_bod/.

¹⁰ Angyal, *Turning Pointe*, 99.

The lightning happened on a Thursday, and I decided to go to church on Sunday. Maybe this says something about my commitment to God. Truthfully, I was also bored of sitting at home while neighbors and relatives bustled around me with arms full of flower arrangements and casseroles. So there I sat in the second pew on Sunday morning—bald head, a necklace of blackened skin, and a jagged burn down my whole left leg. One speaker took the stand and told the story of what he saw that Thursday night. It was a church camping trip, after all, and everyone’s kids had come home telling alarming stories. My fingers started to go numb.

That was when it hit me: everyone in the congregation wanted a look at *my body*. My survival was a sign from God to them—and to me, too—so they wanted to see where the electricity had traveled, trace the marks it left, bear witness to the impossibility of my wellness. I was suddenly aware of the many eyes fixed on my family’s pew as the speaker waxed on. I sat up straighter and adjusted my dress, wondering whether I came across as ephemeral and unaffected. Who was I kidding? I was bald, for heaven’s sake.

Throughout this medical emergency, I had somewhat disconnected from my physical self. This might not make sense, given the nature of my injuries, but hey, you try being heavily medicated while physicians insert a catheter and poke your eyeballs. The attention from my fellow churchgoers was well-intended, but I found it shockingly unwelcome. I couldn’t handle one more pair of eyes—no matter how kindly they looked—breaking me down to parts, seeing problems to be fixed. I don’t remember much else that happened that Sunday.

I never felt so much like a *body* in my fifteen years of dancing as I did in the months after the lightning strike. Both contexts involved celebrating the body’s ability, but only as a dancer did I earn that celebration by my own merit. The injuries drove an emotional wedge between my body and my mind; I was stuck in my head, but all anyone was interested in was my body. That Sunday morning after the lightning, the members of my congregation replaced *me* with their own projections, painting their own minds over the canvas that was my body. How can eyes be so dehumanizing? I felt like grabbing the microphone from that speaker, pointing an accusatory finger over the stand, and yelling, “What does my body have to do with you? Why do my injuries give you the right to look at me today?”

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On July 1, 1858, the Linnean Society of London presented Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace’s paper on natural selection titled *On the Tendency of Species to form Varieties*,

the first public unveiling of the theory that species change over time by inherited variation and environmental pressure.¹¹¹² When Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* a year later, he used the pigeon as his clearest analogy for evolutionary change. Ornamental pigeon varieties, all descended from the wild rock dove (*Columba livia*), demonstrated how intentional selection could reshape bodies with remarkable speed. In his own loft, Darwin crossbred pigeons in an attempt to recreate *Columba livia* by reversing centuries of selective breeding, an effort as unlikely as producing a modern human infant genetically identical to Neolithic *Homo sapiens*. Still, the pigeon offered him a living demonstration of how variation accumulates and how nature, like the pigeon fancier, selects traits that help a species survive.¹³ Thus the humble pigeon unlocked some of the biggest secrets of the natural world and forever changed the significance of the body.

Charles Darwin wasn't the only Englishman with an expressed interest in pigeon breeding in 1858. John Matthews Eaton, on whom little to no personal information survives, published a reference book on March 5 of that year titled *A treatise on the art of breeding and managing tame, domesticated, and fancy pigeons*. Serendipitously enough, a copy of this book filled with Darwin's own notes in the margins was recovered from the Darwins' personal library after his death in 1882. Eaton's foreword, addressed "to my young and inexperienced brother in the Fancy," makes the distinction between a pigeon lover and a pigeon *fancier*, the former being a mere enthusiast and the latter being an overseer of pure breeding practices and physical perfection.¹⁴ The treatise is a reference book for pigeon *fanciers*, collecting the ins and outs of breeding alongside the most desirable bodily specifications, plus a few tips for treating sick birds yourself (words like "recipe" and "excrement" are helpfully defined in a glossary on page 108) and extensive footnote commentary from Eaton himself. The exhaustive detail signals a cultural shift: by the mid-nineteenth century, selective breeding had shifted from agricultural innovation to genteel pastime.¹⁵

¹¹ Zach Zorich, "July 1, 1858: Darwin and Wallace Lay Out Theory of Evolution," *Wired*, July 1, 2011, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.wired.com/2011/07/0701darwin-wallace-linnaean-society-london/#:~:text=The%20Linnaean%20Society%20of%20London,Modern%20biology%20is%20born.>

¹² George Ordish and Pearl Binder, *Of Pigeons and People* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1965), 30.

¹³ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (London: John Murray, 1859), 24.

¹⁴ John Matthews Eaton, *A Treatise on Pigeons* (London: G. Routledge & Co., 1858), iii, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

¹⁵ Alvin H. Sanders, *The Breeder's Gazette*, 1915, quoted in Department of Animal Science, Iowa State University, "Robert Bakewell," last modified June 2021, <https://www.ans.iastate.edu/about/history/people/robert-bakewell>.

The varieties of pigeon illustrated in Eaton's treatise look too slender to yield enough meat for a pigeon pie, too frilly to be capable of efficient flight, too sheltered to nibble up excess grain around the estate.¹⁶ For example, I think that the English Pouter (*Columba gutturosa anglicana*)—Eaton's personal favorite—looks more like a grape on stilts than a grandchild of the rock dove.¹⁷ However, Eaton wrote that “the English Pouter is so infinitely superior for elegance and style... I should scarce think any good Fancier would attempt to breed an inferior bird when he has the opportunity to breed the superior bird.”¹⁸ Eaton's recommendation was that a winning pouter would fetch its owner a medal or five shillings at a poultry show—but, of course, “the value of the prize or medal ought not so much to be looked upon as the *honour* of taking it.”¹⁹

Eaton insisted that pigeon breeding is an honorable pastime, even an art form. But what's so honorable about creating ornamental pigeon varieties that wouldn't survive naturally? All that time and money could go towards a more applicable sort of selective breeding, or to a more worthwhile pastime altogether—at least Darwin used his interest in pigeons to further scientific understanding. Basically, the honor of the hobby lay in the fact that the working class couldn't participate. There was absolutely no money in winning at poultry shows, as each winning bird received only five shillings.²⁰ There was no practical application for ornamental pigeons in English agriculture or cuisine. Only the aristocracy had the time and money to waste on perfecting their pet pigeons. Eaton wrote that “there are three classes of people who keep Pigeons. Pigeon Fanciers, Pigeon Breeders, and people who suffer a few mongrels to fly about their premises... Pigeon Fanciers are those who, from the love of the birds themselves, cherish them... for their beauty, and keep the different varieties in various shades of perfection.”²¹ He only included a glossary in his treatise because he feared the book would “fall into the hands of many of the illiterate part of mankind [Pigeon Breeders], who are altogether ignorant of the terms of Art, and even in the meaning of many words of more frequent use among the politer part

¹⁶ Ordish and Binder, *Of Pigeons and People*, 23.

¹⁷ The goitrous neck of a pouter—fanciers call it the crop—is home to an air sac present in all pigeon varieties. The crop can grow and shrink with the pigeon's air intake, but the finest English Pouters have perfectly spherical crops. I showed a photograph of an English Pouter to my mom, who said “he looks like he's going to tip over.”

¹⁸ Eaton, *A Treatise on Pigeons*, 60.

¹⁹ Eaton, *A Treatise on Pigeons*, 132.

²⁰ Five shillings in 1858 is equivalent to fifty dollars and fifty-eight cents in the United States at the time of this paper's publication.

²¹ Eaton, *A Treatise on Pigeons*, 130.

[Pigeon Fanciers].”²² Typical to Victorian England, certain classes of people were quietly barred from the brotherhood of the fancy.

Charles Darwin is remembered as saying, “the love for all living creatures is the most noble attribute of man.”²³ Eaton would likely agree, but I don’t think he loved pigeons in the way Darwin meant. I think he, and all pigeon fanciers of his ilk, loved pigeons’ *bodies*. Seriously, who could look at an English Pouter and assume that it’s happy and comfortable, leading a full and valuable life? It’s an odd kind of love that looks at the body of the rock dove, the product of millions of years of natural selection, and thinks, “I will make this admirable, I will make this nice to look at—I will make this *perfect*.”

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If I asked you to imagine the perfect woman’s body, what would you see? What color are her eyes? Her hair? Her skin? How does she look when she smiles? How tall is she? How old is she? How is her torso shaped? What size shoe does she wear? Where does she carry the most muscle? Is she injured? Visibly disabled? Has she undergone any medical or cosmetic surgeries?

I bet you’d have a definitive answer to each of these questions, even if you’d never given them much thought.²⁴ We receive constant messages, both implicit and explicit, about what makes a body acceptable or not. The content of these messages varies along the complicated intersections of culture and identity (e.g. religion, ethnicity, gender, age, etc.), but we all receive them: wincing in the dressing room, exercise trends, dialogue in successful movies.²⁵ The body is the canvas on which you express your conformity to the rules of your respective culture.²⁶

We feel the urge to make a citizen’s arrest, so to speak, when we see a body that breaks these unwritten rules. We may go as far as prohibiting hairstyles in the workplace, staring at limb differences, or telling total strangers that they should change their weight. This isn’t out of true concern for someone else’s wellbeing; this is a way of administering punishment to a body that’s been getting away with it for far too long. Somehow, seeing the tiniest sliver of a full human being, we feel qualified to deliver wake-up calls to these miscreants before their bodies get them

²² Eaton, *A Treatise on Pigeons*, xix.

²³ International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), “Love for All Living Creatures: This Darwin Day,” last modified February 12, 2018, <https://www.ifaw.org/journal/love-for-all-living-creatures-this-darwin-day#:~:text=As%20Charles%20Darwin%20said%2C%20%20The,impart%20the%20desire%20to%20PROTECT.>

²⁴ I wonder whether your perfect woman looks like anyone you know personally?

²⁵ A few comments I saw about women’s bodies on Instagram today: “Am I the only one that’s disgusted?” “Only dogs like sticks and bones.” “She’s a three at most.” “That’s unhealthy.” “This is sad.”

²⁶ Hayley Pierce, conversation with the author. Utah, October 17, 2024.

into big trouble—and we even administer that punishment to ourselves. Some individuals with eating disorders report feeling a sense of atonement for perceived failures when they binge, purge, or restrict.²⁷²⁸ Roxane Gay, feminist writer and rape survivor, writes that “food offered comfort when I needed to be comforted [after the assault] and did not know how to ask for what I needed from those who loved me. Food tasted good and made me feel better.”²⁹ How distressing that humans did not offer her the same relief in the wake of such trauma; is it fair to say that Gay arrested herself?

These arrests are especially common among women, “whose worth and achievement are judged largely on the basis of how they look.”³⁰ Take this story of Barbara, a presumably average-looking lady, meeting a fat woman on the bus:

Barbara at first had felt great pity for how hard the woman’s life must have been... [she] imagined that being fat must have cost this woman tremendous effort and energy. But her pity had soon turned into anger at what she believed the woman was going to kill herself by being so fat. She wanted to shake the woman, to tell her to pull herself together.

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Barbara did not know this woman, and they likely never met again. So why did she care? Why did this woman’s mere presence stir Barbara to such unexpressed rage?

Arresting bodies that break the rules is how we maintain the authority of those same rules, and thus our expectations and body acceptance stray further and further from reality. Think of Lauren Fadeley Veyette, the ballerina whose natural weight proved unacceptable to New York City Ballet. Think of the English Pouter, the unholy product of generations of rock doves whose own bodies weren’t worthy of a gentleman’s attention. Consider this quote from Dr. Lexie Kite and Dr. Lindsay Kite, experts on body image resilience:

Even when we deem ourselves to be higher in the hierarchy than someone else, based on size, shape, age, skin color, hair texture or style, or any other visible variable, we still lose. We might feel like winners in the moment, but we’re buying into our own

²⁷ “Eating Disorder Maintaining Factors.” *MentalHealth.com*. Last updated September 25, 2024. <https://www.mentalhealth.com/library/eating-disorder-maintaining-factors>.

²⁸ Millman, *Such a Pretty Face*, 135.

²⁹ Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (New York: Harper, 2017), 53.

³⁰ Millman, *Such a Pretty Face*, 67.

³¹ Millman, *Such a Pretty Face*, 66.

oppression and silently picking up the same sharp measuring stick to be used against us.

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Maybe there's some merit to these rules that discipline and measure, even in the contexts of professional ballet and hobby breeding. After all, it was the strict discipline of ballet technique that enthralled my body and brain for fifteen years; elitism is half the appeal of the art form. Discipline is the key to discovery and achievement, and isn't nature all about survival of the *fittest*? But what is the cost of *obligatory bodily discipline*, the appropriation of every body by the public eye, the fight to measure up embedded deep into our cultures? How long has it been since the natural body was acceptable?

Instead of seeing other bodies as vessels for whole people, we tend to fill the vessels with ourselves. Why did the fat woman make Barbara so angry?—she probably feared gaining weight herself and directed this hypothetical self-loathing at a real person. I think this is why we find bodies to be so entertaining, from *Swan Lake* and petting zoos to circus acts and fashion runways—it's a chance to project. Honestly, do you think John Matthews Eaton thought he was doing pigeons a great service by paying such close attention to their breeding? No, he perfected their bodies in the same way he might have perfected the cravat tied around his neck—to draw attention to his own privilege and superiority.

Here's what Eaton didn't know: not a single perfect pigeon has walked (strutted?) the earth for about five thousand years. Since *Columba livia* was first domesticated near the Mediterranean, countless civilizations have carried their pet pigeons to and fro. Genghis Khan, for example, directed troops across the Mongolian Empire via carrier pigeon, and European settlers packed pigeons to the Americas as a protein source. The geographic separation due to eons of migration led to the natural development of isolated pigeon varieties, a process known as allopatric speciation in evolutionary circles. That is to say, we humans guided the hands of natural selection by forced migration. Is forced migration more ethical than the selective breeding of pigeons for show? I think so. In the former case, the pigeon varieties slowly developed to play active roles in their respective ecologies. In the latter case, fancy pigeons played no role at all in their ecologies. But allopatric speciation by forced migration is still an instance of human cultures meddling with natural processes, so I'm open to argument on this.

³² Lexie Kite and Lindsay Kite, *More Than a Body: Your Body Is an Instrument, Not an Ornament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020), 126.

Much like the human genome, a pigeon's genome tells the story of its variety's migration and adaptation. The "older" an isolated group of a given species is, the greater genetic variety exists within the group. Genetic variety can arise from environmental demands, breeding bottlenecks, and spontaneous mutation. *Columba livia* is so old that present-day feral pigeons in any country likely have more genes in common with the English Pouter than with their rock dove ancestors.³³ Ongoing research using genomic sequencing confirms Darwin's theories about why pigeon varieties appeared to be such "well-defined species" despite being members of the same flock.^{34,35}

The genomic impossibility of purity dictates the impossibility of phenotypic perfection; in other words, it's laughable to love pigeons but only see their value at poultry shows. Did you know Cher Ami, an English homing pigeon (*Columba livia domestica*), lost an eye and a leg when he flew twenty-five miles in twenty-five minutes in October 1918, carrying a message that saved nearly two-hundred American soldiers from certain death?³⁶ He received two posthumous medals for his service to the military.³⁷ Or that B.F. Skinner, the famed behavioral psychologist, trained pigeons to accurately guide American missiles and shoot down enemy torpedoes during World War II?³⁸ Who would waste time worrying about the plumage and form of their English Pouters when they could be training them to save lives?

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Months passed before I realized where that anger came from: *my body has something to do with me*. My body facilitates my human experience; it's where I live. That Sunday, I wasn't feeling the desperate rage that Barbara felt on the bus, but the bright flame of self-love and protection. I think it's an aspect of what Betty Friedan called "the problem that has no name," an

³³ The pigeons you see roosting on skyscrapers and strutting down sidewalks are feral, not wild. The word "feral" describes species that were once domesticated, but now have to fend for themselves again. Apparently, some aspects of domestication are irreversible.

³⁴ George Pacheco et al. "Darwin's Fancy Revised: An Updated Understanding of the Genomic Constitution of Pigeon Breeds." *Genome Biol Evol.*, March 1, 2020. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32053199/>.

³⁵ Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 24.

³⁶ Charles Foy, *Pigeons for Pleasure and Profit*. London: L. Upcott Gill, 1906, 3.

³⁷ Cher Ami's taxidermied body is presently on display in the Smithsonian—I hope he's the only veteran to ever receive that honor.

³⁸ Patrick Kiger, "B.F. Skinner: The Man Who Taught Pigeons to Play Ping-Pong and Rats to Pull Levers," *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 8, 2012, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/bf-skinner-the-man-who-taught-pigeons-to-play-ping-pong-and-rats-to-pull-levers-5363946/>.

indignation at one's own objectification.³⁹ I couldn't stand the thought of someone looking at my body and not seeing *me*, in all my complexity and perfection.

I have a tattoo now. This summer marked five years since the lightning strike, so my parents, sisters and I all went and got matching lightning bolts. Mine is blue, tucked behind my right ear. The tattoo isn't normally obvious, but on days I wear my hair up, someone always notices it for the first time. That's the only reason the story comes up these days, now that our burns have faded and the buzz cut has grown out. Only a couple of my scars are still visible—a soft row of chain links from a necklace burned into my collarbone, a pale patch below my navel from the metal button of my jeans, and an angry red line behind my right ear from the two tympanoplasties. Actually, I only imagine it as an angry red line, since I can't possibly see behind my own ear. Maybe that's why I wanted my tattoo there, too—a token of survival that I'll never actually see.⁴⁰

I won't ever get to see my whole body in three dimensions, and neither will you. Maybe that's alright, because there are better ways to see a person. Our bodies, each with a unique genotype, tell stories of resilience and adaptation that generate a rainbow of phenotypes to enable our survival. How can the power of the human body, its inborn ability to do good, ever be summed up in rules of validity like “Length of Leg... [no longer than seven and a quarter inches, or one-third of the length of the body]”?⁴¹ I'm learning to see our bodies for what they are—single aspects of complete people. Can I trust you to take good care of your body without my scrutinizing eyes?

I took my mom to the ballet on Saturday. Her lightning bolt is small and black, almost a freckle on her right wrist. We perched in the mezzanine as the curtain rose on Balanchine's *Serenade*. My feet turned out to fifth position as we watched (wouldn't it be fun to take a ballet class again? Maybe I should look off campus for some recreational options), the corps de ballet moving through complex formations with wings outstretched. It took me ten minutes to notice: one of the dancer's right arm was much shorter than her left, with no hand at the end. She looked perfect.

³⁹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1963), 7.

⁴⁰ Or maybe I knew I'd eventually hate any tattoo I had to look at for the rest of my life. I don't think I'll be able to commit to another tattoo design unless I survive something like that again.

⁴¹ Eaton, *A Treatise on Pigeons*, 61.