

Planet Dysmorphia

By Claudia Weiskopf

This would be easier if I didn't have a body.

The idea materialises in my mind like an autumn leaf loosed fast from a tree. It drops into my outstretched palm as if to say, *'Here I am, and aren't you silly for not arriving at me earlier?'*

An infected tree does not keep its limbs. If my body is the problem, then not having one would solve the issue nicely. The idea and I lie on the bathroom floor together, the terrazzo tiles leaving cold teeth marks on my skin. Somehow, I always end up here. There's something deeply therapeutic about a bathroom floor. Most issues can be solved by an hour or two down there.

Well, maybe not all issues.

Safe in the floor's embrace, I allow myself to drift. Let the idea of incorporeality send me away from this body, away from this room. I imagine floating around in the ether as a shining cloud of thought, unbound by the passé laws of gravity. I envision unzipping my skin like a sweatshirt and shimmying out of it, letting it fall back to the ground with a thump - good riddance - and emerging with sticky butterfly wings, ribs you can see, the power of weightlessness. I become the wind; imperceivable, omnipresent.

Perhaps it would not be easier if I had no body at all. Easier only if I did not fight and struggle with the one I am currently in. Ownership is a peculiar thing, isn't it? *My body*. I am it and it is me. Yet no matter the meditations or mindfulness tutorials, I cannot reconcile the idea of my

soul with this lump of bone, this stretched skin. We have never seen eye to eye. We are not sisters, or cousins, or even friends.

We are foes.

Though I am soppy and sentimental, this softness does not extend to myself. I weep over clothes that don't fit anymore, too frayed for even a demotion to cleaning rag. I drive past the house I grew up in and fight the urge to barge inside, lock myself in my childhood room, peel back the paint and find my beloved fairy wallpaper hiding beneath.

Youth is a hazy summer day, all melting ice creams and adventures. Everything is bright and wonderful and there is no pain. I was not aware of myself then, far less my body. It was just a vehicle for gallivanting, getting from one tree house to the other. I wonder when this all changed. Before the weight loss ads and fashion magazines had me in their grips. Before I understood that boys don't like chubby girls, but rather girls who float a few feet off the ground, light like a fairy. Before I realised my body was a currency that the media itched to devalue.

Puberty was kind to me in some ways, and relentlessly cruel in others. The soft puppy fat of my face has never shifted and my hips, wide even in youth, have careened out. My knees have dimples in them. A friend once told me I have grandma arms, the skin swooping softly away from the muscle like wings. My feet are abnormally large and my hands abnormally small. The least they could do is match.

There are good things, too. I have eyes like the palest New Zealand jade. My skin is olive even in winter. My hair, despite years of bleach and DIY colorants, is shiny and gold-edged in the sun. The inside of my forearms are soft as rabbit's fur. It's not all bad.

And yet to me, stuck firmly and irrevocably on Planet Dysmorphia, I am the monster in the cupboard. Somewhere along the way, I was plucked from my bed and dumped unceremoniously here. This foreign world, terrain gnarled and inhospitable, has been my home ever since.

I used to lie awake each night, no more than fourteen years old, and pray to God that I would wake up skinny. I don't believe in God, didn't even then, and yet I begged Him with the flagrant desperation of a sinner entering Hell. Maybe I was just begging to be returned home from a planet with no escape hatches, no Earth-bound pods.

There was this girl in my class, her every word to me cruel and glass-sharp, with the most perfect body I'd ever seen. Long tanned limbs and an athletic, almost boyish build. I prayed each night that when I rolled out of bed the next morning, my body would be hers. I would happily forgo the map of memory that I had etched on my own skin, the scrapes and scars and freckles from a life well-lived. They could have it all if I were reformed from clay, scraped slender and perfect by a sculptor's benevolent hand. The world would be right, then.

Not only did I believe that being thin would fix me - I believed it would fix everything else. My parents wouldn't be getting a divorce. I would have friends, boys would ask me out. I wouldn't be bullied anymore. I would be one of *those* girls who I watched out of the corners of my eye, blonde hair gleaming in the sun, untouchable and electric. My dad would tell me he loved me when I begged him to.

I got my wish, but as you might imagine, it didn't quite have the desired effect. I became thin. When I got sick of my own fruitless hoping, I took action. I drank only black coffee for days, hands shaking so hard that the liquid nearly sloshed over the rim. I starved myself, letting the feeling of being empty become an old friend. I threw up each dinner like clockwork. I measured

my progress with dress sizes and my fingers around my wrist, always checking for changes. I kept my secrets close like love letters, and when people commented on my change, I smiled and doubled my efforts. I grew my hair, took care of my skin, graduated from shapeless baggy clothes to things that hugged my new form. I was finally enough for the rest of the world.

And yet I was not enough for me.

At my lowest weight, I still believed that I was the beast under the bed. The gnarled trees of my new planet had crept into my veins, my eyes, blinding me a little more each day. I even took ‘before’ pictures in the mirror, sullen faced and grave, intent on a new fitness journey. I would transform again. I lay in bed for days, too trampled by hatred and hollowness to even go outside. I turned away from friends, family, those who now sought me out like one of those electric girls I’d grown up envying. I *tortured* myself. It did no good. The thing that I had craved and crawled for did not change my life, nor me.

I didn't even see how thin I'd become. In my mind, I was still that pudgy teen praying to a God she didn't believe in.

This all has the candy hard sweetness of past pain, something to be encapsulated in neat little adages. “*When I was your age,*” and “*Oh yes, I've been through that too*”. I am different now, yes, but far from better. Dysmorphia and I are still roommates. We have come to know each other well, and though it defies eviction, we can cohabit most days in peace.

Some night it howls at the walls and scratches at my door. Some nights it eats all the food in the fridge ... or is that me? It whines and wheedles like a child, begging me to relapse.

But sometimes it is quiet, driven away by the warm arms of a friend or my partner. Sometimes it leaves me in peace for a whole week, locked sulkily in its room, music blasting. If I

don't look in the mirror after a shower or analyse my body too closely, we can skirt around each other silently in the hallway.

I have grown, too. Years of cognitive behavioural therapy, antidepressants and the watchful eyes of loved ones have kept me on track. My dinner stays in my stomach and my fingers only occasionally stray to my wrist. I have fought as hard for recovery as I have for thinness, and for that I am proud. I do not worship my body, nor revere it. Instead, I treat it as a piece of machinery. It needs food and water as a car needs coolant and fuel. My legs are simply propellants, my arms are cranes, my stomach the engine. I am a caretaker, my body not some temple but a working - if stubborn - vehicle.

This helps.

I don't think I have ever left Planet Dysmorphia. It's possible that I never will. But maybe, just maybe, my torch can beat back its dark snaking hands. Maybe one day, I will find that lone escape pod in the rubble. Maybe one day, I will return home.