

by JILL MAGI

When something in life troubles me, an extended project of poetry helps me approach the core of the trouble. Along the way, there is research to be done and so the language of poetry acquires some scaffolding: facts, history, cultural info, sentences, interpretation. In the end, I don't know which structure supports which.

Stutter and Segment *from* COMPASS & HEM / Lyrics and Notes from My Body Project

HEM

red doors sigh and open
vulnerable to voice and joy the body
discards class absorbing artifacts of culture

to work to swim to flirt

planting willows, raising the shades
eating the book, reading the body

SPINE

4. the columnar process *resembles noun.* 3. Courage or will
power and back back sentence and hollow

BODY

I write into this conundrum of body and agency and language explored in Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of World*. It is not just language, but it is the act of speaking that marks agency for me. Attuned to this, I cannot ignore the stutter that attempts to express the bodily state. How even its joy seems to want language to leave it alone.

BODY

printing 4. a. to give shape to and study Furnish with or church
a bounded flesh INDEXES or the remains

SPINE

The Renaissance body: compass-shaped, subject to the will, a subject of study. Language annotates the body at the hem of DaVinci's drawings. The sentence needs the body, the body needs the sentence.

SPINE

Waiting for his mother he opens the book
only certain passages she said.
Two sets of doors as walls peel historical footage table
from which the moisture shrinks who can
be read
during war letters line up in windows pulled down on absent bodies.

SCAR

War, institutions of slavery, and programs of torture and genocide remove the possibility to listen to and to read expressions of pain. Inflicting pain requires not only ignoring the body, but ignoring language, even vocalizations. It is utterly dehumanizing, for oppressor and oppressed, but this is an institution of dehumanization with which we are familiar. So-called civil societies agree that voices expressing pain do not, at certain times, matter. It is political. The dominator does not even have to admit that they are required to inflict pain. Rather, the rhetoric is that they are performing this inhumanity for the greater good. Be wary of the means alleging a different end.

SCAR

I regard my mother's body as a kind of war-torn body. She had polio as a child and now suffers from post-polio syndrome. And so the body echoes, not always progressing toward wellness or rest, just as a state must eventually have to deal with all of the effects of its wars.

LOT

disremembering dis-
remembering all now heart you round me right
I walk I lift up
heart eyes you lean as
petals drift everywhere your broken
red for me to see
a light and body must be here

LOT

befalls DIVIDE Fate 1. an object used
fixed boundaries. (land into lots) *When she looked*

PILLAR

says labor conducive to health
to breed one focus on an investment to bear
between the rows to deliver
to pro-
fit between lines
by force by force and deadly
hope a cure-
child? said should be a sacred event
producing as he stands eyeing the idle saying

PILLAR

In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*, Jacqueline Jones describes how the slave master would dig a depression in the ground that would cradle the slave's pregnant belly, leaving her back exposed for him to beat and whip, an ultimate display of commodification of both mother and unborn child.

PILLAR

run hands over marble and folds
says her wheelchair just a repellent artifact
her not-slaying body
disfigured absorbs his un-
fit morality shortened limbs
shortened gaze should not
be represented nor able to re-
produce should mother only
her defect not in uni-
form not wearing maleness the body the monument folds

COMPASS

The wheelchair-bound body searches for the push-button door and ramp. This body is sent, often, on a circuitous route. The able body is allowed to be efficient, to choose; it is the planned-for body.

COMPASS

On the first day that I realized my mother was "disabled," her post-polio was already quite advanced. At her request, we visited the World Trade Center site. My father pushed her in her wheelchair. I saw, for the first time, how difficult the streets and walkways are, how many curbs do not slope down to the street. Our anxiety, heightened. I entered into an awareness of her body.

COMPASS

An artist's realistic rendering of a pregnant woman who is wheelchair-bound and deformed, her limbs shortened by a hereditary disease, creates a protest in Trafalgar Square. In the company of statues of soldiers on horses, muscles bristling, uniforms, enlarged hands holding weapons, this statue causes disgust, complaints of an inappropriate, un-stately, and irresponsible presence.

forget that poor women, because abortions are not covered by Medicaid, have long been under the control of the "body of law" and its close cousin: class status. Given all of this, I do not think it's a coincidence in this political climate that *The New York Times* recently declared that having a baby is "hip" and that all manner of industries surrounding pregnancy are surfacing, thriving.

HEM

While pregnancy is declared "hip," I do not see these "hip," pregnant bodies speaking in poems and art about their pregnancies and motherhood. More commonly, the celebrity pregnant body is photographed and commented on, especially what they are wearing. The concern is with the surface, the look of pregnancy, its market value.

HEM

At seven months pregnant, my friend is disgusted by the gathering of pigment that forms a long vertical line down her belly. This line, called "la linea negra," part of the reality for many pregnant women, is photo-shopped out of most portraits and magazine covers. Although it is natural, the line is seen as an interruption of the smooth, available surface of skin and would discourage selling pregnancy as an ideal.

PILLAR

who occupies a central or responsible 1. A slender COLUMN decorate
with a *pillar of the state*

PILLAR

There are new subsidized health insurance programs that cover the child but not the mother. Is it the epitome of capitalism that the child, the budding new consumer, should be kept healthy while the "out of commission" mother can be allowed to fall ill? Is she contingent? Replaceable? Echoes, here, of the insanity and logic of the special depression dug out for the pregnant slave woman's belly.

BODY

between An Act to Discourage Immorality
of Unmarried Females
by Providing for Sterilization of the Unwed Mother
Under Conditions of This Act
and Corporate Welfare
They Are a Tax on the Public Purse

COMPASS

Many still believe that black women are hyper-fertile despite the high numbers of black women who suffer from fibroids, have low fertility rates, and despite the fact that white families are larger than black families. Statistics also show that black women are choosing child-free lives at the same rate as white women.

ATLAS

Also true, and often ignored or suppressed, is the reality of forced or incentivized sterilizations for poor women, black women, Puerto Rican women, and American Indian women. Medicaid will still cover the expense of that procedure. And so, as contemporary policy reflects, there is a belief that their bodies are essentially reproductive and, to the detriment of the state, are out of control, resource-depleting.

Comment: sorry—just leave
STET

ATLAS

By labeling poor women and poor women of color as hyper-fertile, immoral, and out of control, attention is moved away from large budget items like corporate welfare and military spending. Women on welfare, raising their children at home, are seen by policy makers as a state burden. Yet there is no state-supported childcare program and the proponents of “attachment parenting” are really saying that only those women who can afford to stay at home will raise psychologically healthy children. All of this while the personal economies of women of the upper and middle classes benefit in great degrees from corporate welfare, a substantially larger federal budget item.

ATLAS

pear-shaped seat of muscle to hold to study to grow
silence running northwards
relentless for the love of the child
to re-
sist memory houses an organ the history upon which hinges
to bear upon fibre and filaments amassed storied
the will the wall
of the will bound bound to hold up The Crisis and Africa
family and skyline while sex-
less shackled in labor and labor

HEM

mother-
child dyad
biological
inevitability
exclusive mother-
hood attached parenting
a unitary
script illustrated in soft
pencil she is wife
and white

HEM

Many women of color report that they do not find “attachment parenting” practical or even desired; shared mothering is valued. Yet, popular baby books and books on motherhood appear to recommend mother and child bonding for as long as possible. Images of this bonding are sketched, impressionistic, taking place in soft focus, privately, personally, usually inside a home, not in a car, on a bus, in a parking lot, office, day care space, or public park. Other faces or even furniture or interior details rarely populate the background. It is a minimalist theater set, flushing out the noise, complexity, and inevitability of interruption from daily life. If a woman truly made this inscribed portrayal her goal, she would be setting herself up for failure.

BODY

do we attend each other's stories?
touch being
to speak between sift and sort difficult
breath streaming toward you
my asthma to say this to say your cramps your
polio say your fibroids our chemistry
finally our spine our lot all sentences

BODY

on the pillow
under gauze I wait for the first trace of midnight cool
to come teach me
 things madly growing every which way
we a tangle with lotus
in deep water

COMPASS

I began with a feeling about my mother's body, remembering her touch, the slightly salty smell of her skin in summer, and her new difficulties getting around, staying well. "My love is her body in pain" was the first line. Simultaneously, in my late thirties, I found myself resenting requests to explain my choice not to have children. I turned to a feeling outside of language and found the complicated body, gender, and "if you are straight, why will you not produce?" Words came as stutters, sprawling, a sound lead to another. In my body, I held the stories of many of my students and friends, suffering from fibroids, and my own sister, suffering from terrible pain every month. Deep into these tissues, I thought of the limits of language, my asthma, the lungs hold grief, "if you can not speak then it's time to call the ambulance." I came across love, too, and not singular, the language told me that this body could not contain—

HEM

And then I read, incorporating into this body many others, of text. Therefore, some of the language and images come from theses sources—follow the synapses if you would like:
Beyond Spring: Tzu Poems of the Sung Dynasty, translated by Julie Landau; *Song of the*

Simple Truth: the Complete Poems of Julia de Burgos; Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* and *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*; *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* by Jacqueline Jones; *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* by Emily Martin; *The Mirror*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky; Toni Morrison's *Beloved*; Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World and Literature* and *The Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*; *An Atlas of Anatomy for Artists* by Fritz Schider; Lesley A. Sharp's "The Commodification of the Body and Its Parts" in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*; Marc Shell's *Polio and its Aftermath: the Paralysis of Culture*; Anne Stavney's "'Mothers of Tomorrow': The New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation" in the *African American Review*; "Race, Gender, and Welfare Reform: The Antinatalist Response" by Susan L. Thomas in the *Journal of Black Studies*; Lao Tsu's *Tao Te Ching*.