

Body Experiment



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Body Experiment

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For my city, Minneapolis, and its insistent good.

“I carry water from the river in my hands a few meters downstream.”

–Jiří Kovanda, 1977

If I had to place my finger on the point of beginning, it would land on the black Marley floor of a dance studio. I was laying on the ground, shoulder blades hackled against stiff surface, feet splayed like the day I was born, fighting off the urge to laugh or flee, and hoping my stomach wouldn't squirm audibly in protest of my horizontal state. My head was being held in the hands of a stranger. He was kneeling behind me with a quiet omnipresence while across the room were twenty more just like us, paired up and touching so peculiarly you'd think it was couples yoga. But it was anatomy class. Tristan, the professor, grounded us in this; we were there to learn about the body.

So I tried to let my skull be a skull. The stranger shifted the weight of it all from one hand to the other, over and over and always gently, as if my head was water in a bowl. I had not realized, until that moment, what it was to carry such a weight, and so a simple act became revelatory relief. He then pressed the ten small-ended bones of his fingertips into the place where neck begins and pulled at this calcified ridge, the bottom line of my skull acting a stone grip to his efforts to stretch my body long-wise. It was a new feeling, this strenuous type of comfort. Like a meditation, trying to mitigate resistance to the now. Usually, the hands of a man carry meaning, harm or sex or friendship or roughness or family or strength or disappointment, but I had to imagine that these didn't. I had to whittle them back to hands. After the practice was completed, I became the hands, my partner taking the role of heavy head, and it was easy to follow the instructions. Tristan's voice floated over us as we, the bodies, complied, breathing out our hesitations. How did we get to this place? Where in a room full of people I felt as safe and comfortable as if I were completely alone.

It was this day of relief that I wrote this collection's titular poem, "Body Experiment," and then a few days later "Sometimes I forget you're on top of me." I think, through some opaque verse, I was trying to say that I had found an answer.

These poems and the environment that produced them became the foundation of my thesis. I set out to write in defiance of the abstract binaries and categories culturally imposed upon our bodies by the hierarchical structures we inhabit and the cult-like legacy of western philosophical tradition. I wanted to throw the mind-body divide out the window and exploit its derivatives for content. I wanted to deal with shame through a lack of it, and to pile embarrassment with positive associations, since no one has ever been embarrassed in their silently abiding. I wanted to heed—instinct, whim, all that is guttural. I wanted a utopia, I realized, a world just out of reach, a world in which the man who calls out to me from across the street is simply saying hello. Or maybe he is even saying, Audrey, you can lay down now, I know it's all been terribly hard lately. In this imagining, I would rest on his stoop awhile, quiet and alright, momentarily relieved. I would be safe. Wouldn't everyone?

I took all this with me to Prague, where I lived out the turning of a season. The city offered me something my home country couldn't, which is the living memory of being unbound. Many Czechs had experienced revolution in their lifetime and embodied the symbolic, political, and physical shift from oppression to freedom. This recent history was a simple, good thing. I was told as much in my very first week there, at a cafe on the Vltava, holding out against the cold. Three men had sat at my table, asking before scraping back chairs, and spoke with me in whatever English they could find. They were in their thirties, farmers and soldiers, visiting Prague for the weekend, and they wanted to tell an American about freedom. This is the freest country in the world, they said. You, with your prisons and your guns and your money, you're not free. So I pressed, and the soldier told me, "He is a farmer." He pointed across the table. "And upon his death, everyone can accompany him like friends." Because of this, he was free.

I walked home, down the river, and thought about freedom. How long had it not been true? How many decades had Czechs spent unable to come together as friends, subjected to censorship and absurdity and broken machines. And here are these men, born at the turning, utterly convinced that something as simple as gathering is the truest marker of freedom. Was freedom what I sought in utopia? The word in its American iteration is so laden with skewed patriotism, used into nothingness, that I hadn't considered it for my purposes, but I was enamored by this new translation. It had been warped, or perhaps clarified, through imprecision of speech; the man's language had given it wings. I was grateful to the chairs those men had sat in, which at home, by custom, would have never been filled. They had gathered like friends, unimposing and steady.

I thought, too, about the unfreedom, fixated on it. Exploited its derivatives. There was one book in particular that had, and has, a dogged way with me—Pavlina Morganova's *A Walk Through Prague: Actions, Performances, Happenings 1949-1989*. It is a map of small resistance brightened by analog documentation; old photos, letters, type-written text. (You can find a picture sourced from it as the cover of this collection, Karel Miller's *Identification*, 1973.) The book serves to catalog the Czech action art movement that bloomed from the paved-over decades of Soviet censorship. It was a movement derived from desire for free expression and constrained by limited access—the only way to create safely and freely was to create unnoticed. These artists, without audience or exhibit, were performing body experiments. The following excerpts are artist statements included in the book:

I used an orcharding technique to graft a twig to my forearm. (Peter Štembera, 1975)

Wooden weapons are distributed to people. They fight. (Milan Knížák, 1965)

I walk carefully, very carefully, as if on ice that can break through at any moment.
(Jiří Kovanda, 1977)

The smallest movement. Relief. I so love the words they use to describe it, as if one sentence, poetry, is more than enough. Amidst productionist propaganda and growing global neo-liberalism, these artists were doing just to do, and then they dared to give it a name.

Some pieces by the AKTUAL ART collection, among others, were conducted by a group of instructors and participants, a format not dissimilar to my anatomy class. The voice tells you to jump, you jump. Then you kiss your neighbor on the forehead after years of not knowing their name. Pick up the wooden sword and fight with it. The voice is godly and wonderfully soft, because this experiment is not real life. It is something different, safer, safe in its boundlessness, unbound by self-constructed purpose and externally-imposed rule and money and time and the train schedule, running away opportunity by the hour.

I grew attached to the idea that the Czechs had imagined their utopia as I had, and now, free, they were living it. They traveled in glistening red tram cars. Their dogs walked loose and smiling through the streets. Their night fell without the heaviness of fear. Their parks were at every turn, framed by cathedrals and pastel baroque faces, unbombed and unmarred after a revolution without violence. Their history was as clean as my country's is dirty, and their winter hardly left a scratch on my skin—I was warmer than I'd ever been. Again I wondered how I got to this place. How do we live this way?

There is a lot that can explain the dream of Prague. Historically, politically, geographically. I would be remiss to go on without stating that the Czech Republic is an ethnostate—nearly ninety percent of the population is ethnically Czech. There is a resounding whiteness, a homogeneity, and a Europeanness that advantages this small country when it comes to cultural cohesion and assumed safety, and as a white, English speaking visitor, I could experience Prague in a way that most people cannot. For three months, I could take what I wanted of it. I could let it be, make it be, the good parts, and do unto Prague as I wanted. I lived gutturally (as I was beholden to nothing and no one), operated on the fringes of norms (living on the fringe of society), and reposed embarrassment as normal and near joyful (for I embarrassed myself each day without fail, sometimes tremendously so). I heard the words of some across-the-street man, calling out to me, and took them as I wished to have them. Perhaps he was saying hello. Perhaps he was offering a place to sit down without wanting a thing in return. His utterance in Czech was made soft by my ignorance, just as the whole city was.

I was wildly happy. Beatifically lonely. I wrote not a word of this collection there. The construction of these poems came limping in the aftermath as I pieced together all that I had gathered. I had been living very close to the surface of a place and grew used to seeing land from behind a train window. Leading up to my final year of school and the writing of this collection, I spent three months in Prague, visited Rome and Athens, Krakow, Berlin, Vienna, and then, in June, with the Phillips Fellowship, I started out on a backpacking trip through Chile and Peru, ending up red-cheeked in August in Mexico City. I had never been so liminal, and certainly never for so long, and I spent a lot of time with one question: What am I in

this place? The question is big and its shadow long, casting over the collection an uncertainty of where to be and how to be there.

The collection itself travels from a vague home-place, flat-landed and pale, to Cusco, Montreal, Rome, northern Greece, lingering awhile in Prague. It gets caught up on people and anger and dreams, starting and ending untethered. Before I'd written a word of this collection, I knew that poetry is the impossible translation. It is incessantly deprecating. To write it is to accept defeat and still love it.

You can live a whole life waking up, standing, walking forward, sitting down, lying down, and falling back asleep. You can cut with a knife and eat with a spoon and never dance. You can sing under your breath and sit there with a crick in your neck and go on quietly when there is something to say. There is loss in that, even if you don't feel the grief. So, as I was writing this collection over the past two years, I was the experiment. Perhaps a failed one, as I spent much of that in thoughtless motion, abiding, or in anger, hitting my fists against things and forgetting to be gentle. But I danced a lot. I made things up. I was kind to strangers. I was kind to friends. I was sorry for my mistakes, for when I hurt other people. I tried to be better, more expansive, more. I tried—here goes the traces of it.

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For a city, not my city

At night these slabs of glass are
mirror after mirror while I am a
close face crystallizing windows
asking a question no one

hears under the pretense of
white noise during the church bells
of midnight mass at the climax
of a play where the man shoots

himself in the head with a
real gun to the standing ovation of
eight hundred thankless and
hungry strangers. Stop.

I'll be moving to a city of little
convenience, pursuing bodies and
sounds amongst which I could
walk at night unafraid—maybe we will

dance but not touch. Maybe
I will go there soon. Soon

the answer will come only in
clamoring bells the new era of
distraction rung in by my own
applause on this empty night.

I will walk where the windows are picture frames:
Gilded and sorry to see me go.

Offering

Smelling you before I find you
standing in my house. All the sounds

of south bound hummingbirds are rolling
from your mouth. In the basket on the table—

all the fish you caught yourself, brought
your spear into the ocean, hooks are hanging

from the shelves, and the basket on the table is
as silver as it's red. I see every part of you

as living, once, and now you're struck with lead.

Will you sit with me? Some offering, a table

laid with meat, a spear brought to the ocean
meant to catch what I can't eat.

Stones of March

First there were the days with your red pupils big and dark as stones, your
scarf where I felt like you were feet shuffling stones kicked down the days
a small bug in my pocket, and into spring where they
you were so cold, but I still came to rest
made you unbutton all smooth and round at
your coats to look at the base of the forsythia,
your heart. I liked what I saw like a shrine for a thing
beating in there, that cannot survive
just a small bug fluttering the changing of the seasons.
against my fingers. I was Smooth and round
careful with you on the nights when you'd curl like when you unbuttoned
your spine to the window my coat to slide it off my shoulders
and hold and to find out about
your knees. I pushed the my
sheets around your fallen hearts. There is nothing quieter than you
pharaoh body, finally peering into me so scared.
lain down to rest, but There are lights in the river,
you still chattered and those scare you too.
there, your teeth closing I told you over the rattle
like a window pane again and again the way I could cup my hands
against something around the quiet moth of your body and
harsh and cold I could not carry you to
feel or understand but some sepulchral family tomb,
tried to imagine. There were scabs how
on your knees you could wrap your scarf
and mine the time you played the tighter and tighter
piano and smiled and led but never change any air but your
a brigade of music through the train station own,
all the asphyxiating in a shroud on the
way to the cup of water train in the night,
at my bedside rattling but you couldn't hear me,
seismically at the thought the rattle ever louder.
of your leaving it behind so I will take what it is
undrunk. Your voice I was given
was quiet, your bike was broken, I have knees of titanium phosphate,
your teeth were grave stones prepared to resist,
and these were the stones of March— and I will give you
your knuckles sat like one of my hearts, because I have
stones between mine your so many. You can have one.
I insist.

Public funeral, moving casket

We make our way down a side street, we are not
anarchic people. The river is black, tide
is crying, those long faced cars are rolling by.
when I loose tears too, I peel my oranges in
the shower, eat with the claws of a fruit bat
but still feel human and clean. Steam we wipe like
nothing was there, and so those old things are gone.
You, I think, go out for some walking, come back
chewing cheeks and seeming drawn. It is a line
walked in single file, loss. It is a river
where you look straight ahead. Slip on ice, we hope
for the pall bearer. It is better to look
at the sky.

Strange prayer

Sometimes I think you are so handsome
I might perish. You carried my desk up
three flights of stairs, understanding torque
and angles with your sleeves rolled up to your
elbows—why would you ever do that? I had
a dream I cannot tell you about, but know that
if I am the horse running from the sounds of the
wind, you are the blades of grass in their chorus
of thunder, spurring on my maniac's religion.
You live in my mind as the shape of man
crossing the crest of a hill in late afternoon,
so when we've just stepped out to smoke
darts on the porch, it's really that I am a valley
and you, the whole sky. I squint into your face
of sun. It has been years now of this
strange praying to god, where god is nebulous

and manly, and I ask him for things that he does not
have. At my forgiveness, you will not flinch.

Prague

This could be Boston, I say, Won't you hold my flowers?
All the trod-on petals make sorry gum stains down the street.

I have left you as I'll know you now, held still by an insect pin
there in your doorway, final frame, with windows flung open

for hoping. Someone knock me off this bike. There is a prize
somewhere for hurting. I could go howling down the avenues

if I were unforgivable, but I'll be quiet in your quiet and forgive you
all your Junes. Pigeons coo louder than you. It's always useless to regret

whatever has been lost among the rustling of wings. So I find myself
unlucky, hair blown all about my face. So the sun doesn't shine only

for myself today. How I loved you with few senses, hearts beat braille
into the stone. How many days 'til I am better? It is so beautiful,

get up.

*What does it mean to water a thirsty bird in a dream (and
the bird keeps praying for you)?*

In Hereford now after two hours trans-Canadian,
charging with my cavalcade of brews
into the realm of pure America.

The thirsty bird of my dream woke me
on a weekend morning and the race went on,
but every bike-tire-fountain and curb-slurry

was a blessing?
So, it was a fated day.

What is there to do with a prayer misfired
but take on the unknown miseries of the grieved
and carry them in some other direction.

I aimed at the corner déj, leaning my burden on those
cool glass cases. I guess I was considering ultimate purpose
and temporary prophets and trying for the lotto while

out on the street the Saturday Hats of
Mile End were bobbing with alighted faith,
and here was mine!

Down the canal I fled, brown-bagged
and parceled. Yes, I was just a basket-baby
paddling furiously towards the beer gardens

with all the honey-soaked amblers spitting cherry
pits across the line. They felt better and were redeemed
and I was too.

Overhead I saw my thirsty bird
fly away on vesper-wings—
Mon dieu, Quebec!

I'll bring you home
with me.

Dream of Tempi Collision, 2023

I had the dream again I was on passenger
train IC62 heading north on the south bound
line. It was Clean Monday and I meant to, I
really did, but I was so far from the Greek
sea—I did not know with what to wash
the soot from off my cheek.

You, either nefarious or dreaming too, were
pulling levers to go seventy, eighty, ninety miles in
the hour, hurtling towards me like a
brick slung from a hand, or like a bomb.

Some things are only bombs if they're
going too fast, or if they hit you just
right, or if they're traced with xylene
and set in an intermodal freight car
heading south on the south bound line. Even
before we touch, your eyes are laden
with ash. After the fire ball,
fallen-wake into life,

I roll on top of your sleeping body to know it with
the whole weight of mine. Where you are
quick, I will be heavy. While I am full of
hearts, you are full of petrol. I can
smell it, and it makes me sick.

This is surely no way
to leave a place, carrying off its dead
for dreams.

Acrolito

Acrolito is a votive meant to hold things, her head ancient
but not pertinent—her head is full of holes. She could have been
a bowl on the credenza, but they asked for, please, a woman, and then
to make a woman, they had to use a knife. Wombless, blessed with
orifice-purpose, held-still hands lifted to the skylight, passed and passed
over by sunbeams, marble sill, insipid veil. Common gestures of modesty
imposed upon her leaving the bath, naked hand over naked navel, (as if
one is not just like the other), her water jar and robe sit next to her,
(ever almost clean), but she is still enough to set a cup on and forget it
—a cyanotype white water ring, except she's never been outside.

Acrolito, there is so much you could tell me
about this violent and laden place. I too have lost some better halves
and let a few jewels slip my fingers, but this is Rome—the worst
is over. Acrolito, where have you been? I hope they pulled you from a lake
and scraped the algae from your marble. I hope they tied the knots
too loose, your canvas cover turned to birdwings. You are inevitably amber.
You are too lovely to stay lost—an ending carved into your cheek bones in
perfect oracle of face—but when they carry you in peril from some soft
forgotten place, I hope they chip your fist against a porthole. At last
they set you on this pedestal, the hill where empires come to pass,
simple tides bowed to the turning and eroding their own walls.
I've come to Rome alone for nothing, to feel an old wind touch my face,
but there will be years I do not know with your still bathing, and so
I hope for you again:

To end up somewhere pale and lichenous as a bird bath in a garden,
holding court under the sun and growing moss mounds over pubis,
gentle bend in arms dipped heavy as a clothesline under sparrows,
burnished ants in marching lines the final legion left to hold. I will tell you
what they didn't when they sculpted you from stone. You are made of something
that is shaking. You are atoms clung by chance. Your votive holes may fill
with rainfall, your chiseled rivulets with brine, and when you're sunk
too deep to excavate,

Who will carry all the jewels? From shore they'll call out,
Acrolito! and you'll be still, and they will miss you.

Body experiment

I know the day opening
Like a pale blue benediction

The birds all slid together on the line
Draping across the horizon

There were bodies holding
Body experiments

Touching without asking for
Or wanting from

Curling bodies arching bodies
And the eyes just rinds

Wet hearts beat
With the joy of coming-upon

Like dewy newborn things
Unfolding in the grass

There were hands that were bowls
And heads that were water

And everyone knew what raindrops feel
When they turn back into pools

I know the day
I dropped a plumb line

Down a fault line
To finally know a day

Where the plates could not touch
And a touch is only that

Cusco,

a singular airstrip, dry,
with people carrying bottles in their hands,
blue and plastic.

Black cat on a tile roof
under a temple to some lady or limb. Dirt cracked
like there is something underneath,
we are waiting at the mouth of a god, carry
your god through the streets, pray. From the
marabout hill, drums
hardly different from traffic, it is a promise
in the shape of a flock

that the thing shouted up will in some form return.

Sending pigeon-flares skyward,
the drums go, the drums go—I said

the boys look like birds and the girls like little flowers.
I said the boys look like flags, the girls just like
flowers, legs as stems to heavy heads. My head
is small, like the solstice,
as they forgive / dance soft as thunder— Will I ever relearn to arrive?

It was
an Inca town, a Spanish town, a dog town, and now

it is this—calling winter what it is with a voice
like a flute, a marching band, a voice like a
thousand stamping feet. The dancers
curl into old leaves on the curb, sweating
on the coldest day of the year.

Am I heavy?

A round slum sparrow like a
teed up golf ball piping still
softly there with ash on its head.

It's in the under, the right
under the Marlboro, the sparrow,
it is holding, like Atlas,

the modicum, some truth.

Sometimes I forget you're on top of me

On the flower quilt, there is stitching
beneath me and a ways to the ground.

You are so close, your face like a running
at the camera in its blur, and your spine

raised as an offer I will have to return.

I want to pull the strands of hair from your
mouth as a favor. I want to look

when you're not looking, so as not to
meet your eyes across the room

like a stranger. Sometimes I forget
you're on top of me. Sometimes

I forget you're inside of me,
distracted by the way your skin

wraps around you like a perfect casing
with no edges, by the way

you are warm, and by the way our
shins meet in passing, reminding me

that beneath you is the white bone
rattling you that could lay on top of me

forever. I breathe for you
for an hour.

Midwinter (or the illusion of forever)

1.

The ice
cracked,
and he was just
chest and arms,
his body sliced
in half
by what was
the ground under
his feet. We
used him as
handles
to pull,
like a thing
that takes two,
and there he
was again, as dark
as if dipped in
ink and already
crystallizing, the
ice fast and
unwilling to give
back the
boy.

2.

The snow holds
our names and
the mark of paws.
It makes
a little girl
of me and
a little boy
of you, makes
little angels
of us all.

3.

We took him to the shore
where nothing could give
way, and he was smiling
so much trying to teach
us the difference
between a boy and
a corpse. It's so gray
in the winter. When
the light comes, I
walk with my eyes
closed to feel it.
Underneath so
much glitter is
something
dead
or dying
or trying
to get out.
Still, the boy
stands there
dripping
in a red
knit
hat.

Waiting for the lurch

i.

Something I like to see is the trains
lined up sleeping on the platform in
Brno-Židenice. There are hills like a body,
the sun falls a star, and us all now, folded

ii.

and waiting. An attendant comes in, the cabin is quiet,
we bring new slips of paper to the bar. I know
the people of Brno are beautiful people, I've seen
across the aisle, waiting; lined up sleeping in the curl
of a shell, gentle like the stream that takes softly their
storms, gentle as the train joins the skyline of smoke stacks,
sleeping like the wheels spinning circles in the land. Dusk
unspooling, land of beetroot, land unstepped on. Now I see it

iii.

through the windows, on the platform, just the shape of her sadness
carried careful as a parcel through a deluge of wet. They press
on the hill of her lying-still body, her sternum descending a falling
star, they press all the sadness from inside her lungs in the final
pale second before dark. It is sudden, the way a train leaves
a station, leaving only a cold, sucking wind. It is small time for

iv.

dying, it is a type of conceit, to leap away from silhouettes that lay
lumpen as bread-ends, to let the window be the city and the mirror
all at once. I ask too late for what I've borrowed—an hour of still
between somewhere and elsewhere. A blood-beer set down at the
sight of the bleeding. An artery goes one way, and then it goes it
again.

What life is this?

Wake up, mouth open, and start to forget
 concrete rising in planes of heat and starlings
 on a metal rim. You cannot see the end
of land, the land it does not end. You cannot keep
the birds in your pocket for later—what once was will
not ever keep. Smaller,
paler, and of a dream,
wake up and make demands of your wings. Go
 see the mice and the rains, balloons
 once helium, follow the twitch in the grass. Sharper,
paler, listen to the breath from the snow.
What life is this? Just kindling for dreams? So sharp now
that no one will touch you. Wrap nothing in
a napkin. You start to forget
 the prairie land peace, where you know what is
 coming and it's more of the same. Pull the vellum
from your eyes, it is morning
now. It is time to live.