

BENEATH
THE
SKIN

A BODY OF ESSAYS

The pieces in *Beneath the Skin* were originally commissioned, performed and broadcast as part of BBC Radio 3's ongoing series *A Body of Essays*, originated and produced by Kate Bland at Cast Iron Radio.



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BENEATH THE SKIN

Great writers on the body

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INTRODUCTION

THOMAS LYNCH

‘To have a body is to learn to grieve’, wrote Michael Hefernan in his poem ‘In Praise of It’. This was the opening line of the penultimate poem in his first of now many collection of poems – a book, like most slim volumes of verse, ignored on five continents, by an author who is internationally unknown, but who has, none the less, happened upon a truth, to wit: it is only in the body that our longings reside, our sorrows, our joys. If our hearts are broken, they are tucked beneath our sternums, snug in our pericardia, thumping out their iambic tunes. Mostly in the bones is where we ache for the embrace of another of our kind, or feel the residual of ancient wounds, old damages, wars long lost or won or fought to standstills. And only through the parts of bodies does mortality work its way into our demise – the cancer or the cardiac arrest, infarction, aneurysm or embolus. We are an incarnate species, embodied, brought into being by the conduct of other bodies, their parts and aspects, attachments and penetrations, the workings of their mysterious components and consortiums.

Even words, we claim in faith, become the flesh.

And whilst we are men and women of parts, we are also, in our own flesh, singular enterprises, solo endeavours. ‘Three cubic feet of bone and blood and meat,’ as Loudon Wainwright wrote for his son, Rufus, to sing into the new century, in his tune, ‘One Man Guy’.

So the collection of essays assembled here goes some way towards making sense of the human condition by examining its particulars. What about the bowel or brain-box makes us who we are?

Was it the bad heart valve or the club foot, the cancerous bladder or the high cheekbones that shaped the rich internal course of our personal narrative? We can only guess. Our mother’s eyes? Our father’s hairline? The freckles, the feet, the heart failure? Who can know how we came to be the ones we are?

We have gathered here a little catalogue of usual suspects, the shared systems of the greater and some lesser animals: guts and lungs, gall bladder and skin – the innards and outer parts in hopes that by knowing the part we might better know the whole of our predicament and condition.

How is it that the parts engaged to send out a presidential tweet storm one day can enact Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto the following evening? And while the heart becomes a ready metaphor for love and longing, grief and bereavement, the core of being, what case might we make for the symbolism of the pituitary gland? Or

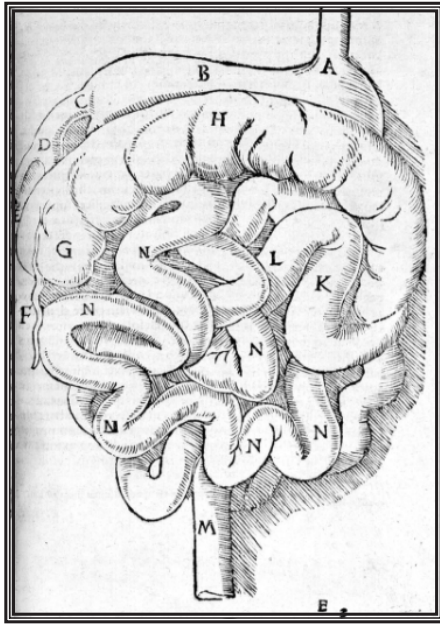
when ‘guts’ are the locale of valour, the cerebellum where a soul might reside, to what end, we might wonder, that first segment of the small intestine, the duodenum? Could it be to further our interest in etymology? The medieval Latin whence its name comes – duodeni, meaning ‘in twelves’ – refers to the fact that, where small intestines are concerned, size apparently matters: the breadth of twelve fingers approximates the length of the duodenum.

We are wholes and parts, one of a *kind*, and *one* of a kind. Still, here is where the part exposes something of substance about the whole, and why writers and readers, as much as medicos and anatomists, ought to be eager to understand these details of our bedevilments and being.

The father of modern essaying, Michel de Montaigne, in an effort to understand his kind, advised the test and measures method, believing, as he wrote in his masterful *Of repentance*, that ‘Each man bears the entire form of man’s estate.’ High in the library of his solitarium, he studied his body, its senses and sounds, gases and appetites, longings, desire. So, in that spirit, here are some bits and pieces, small gravities, an effort to better understand humanity by looking at the human being, the sapient animal that is Man by meditating on its parts.

INTESTINES

NAOMI ALDERMAN



The proximity of the anus to the genitals, Freud tells us, is the source of much if not all human neurosis. It's fashionable to distance oneself from Freud these days, to say 'I wouldn't go that far' and 'of course Freud was sex-obsessed'. But I would go that far, and most humans are sex-obsessed.

The gut, frankly, is a problem. What it does is not only mysterious and puzzling – as are all our internal organs to a great extent – but also difficult for us to bear. And when we start to think about the symbolism of the gut, we might understand what Freud meant.

At one end of the gut is the mouth – a delightful place of many different kinds of joy. And then, at the other end, there's the anus. It produces farts, which stink of decay, foulness and poison. It makes poo, also foul-smelling, bearing disease, a sticky, stinky, brown contaminant. And it comes out of us! And not just out of our own bodies, but out of a hole *right next to* the parts of the body that can give us such great pleasure, whose development indicates adulthood, which can produce new life. It's like a terrible

joke played by human biology, to drag us down from the heights to the depths, to remind us that whatever ecstasy we find, we're also, essentially and at all times, full of shit. This is why poo is so funny. This is why we have to laugh at it. If we didn't laugh, we'd cry.

For Ernest Becker, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*, the anus and the shit it produces are more than just a joke – they're a terror. They represent the corruption of the flesh, the fate that awaits us all. 'What am I?' a child might ask herself. 'I am a thing which takes in beautiful, glowing, healthy, delicious, colourful, exciting food. And then what happens? I turn it into shit.' This is the inevitability of decay writ small, writ daily. It is the inevitability of death. 'The anus and its incomprehensible, repulsive product,' says Becker, 'represents not only physical determinism and boundness, but the fate as well of all that is physical: decay and death.'

The three-year-old daughter of a friend asked her mother what happens to the food she eats. 'Your body takes energy from it and then you turn it into poo,' replied the mother. Her daughter's crying was inconsolable. 'No mummy, no no,' she kept saying, 'no no no.' It is the same cry as in Julian Barnes' *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, when he recounts his thanatophobia – fear of death – as he wakes in the night, 'alone, utterly alone, beating pillow with fist and shouting "Oh no, Oh No, OH NO" in an endless wail'. Shit is death. Death is serious. We have

to laugh at shit. We can't take it seriously because it's so intensely serious.

The mouth, the anus, the intestines between them, transforming beauty to rot and deliciousness to disgust. It is in here that the rubber meets the road in our relationships with our bodies – where we come daily face to face with the corruption and decay that is our eventual inheritance. Bodies are mysterious, we are puzzles to ourselves. But it's here in the intestines that the obvious mystery is most apparent. If I can do this to food, what on earth am I?

When I was in my early twenties, my mother, then in her mid-fifties, was rushed to hospital with a burst intestine. The reasons for the rupture have never been particularly clear. Perhaps it was an infection in a fissure in the gut. Perhaps it was a weakness caused by the caesarean through which I was born, years earlier. Perhaps something else entirely. She had to have a colostomy bag for eighteen months, while her bowel healed; there's an experience to bring a family face to face with the realities of the workings of the gut. My mother's mother had also experienced some kind of ruptured bowel in her mid-fifties. I stare at my stomach and wonder what it has in store for me.

But that's not all. If the story of my family were written by a novelist, one might say that the symbolism around the stomach and the bowel and the process of digestion

was just a little overdone, just a bit too obvious. A close relative was born with pyloric stenosis – one of the sphincters in his stomach wouldn't open – and his earliest days were long bouts of dramatic projectile vomiting while his mother tried to persuade the doctor that something was really wrong. He had to be operated on when he was only a few days old, just a tiny baby with a great long scar across his abdomen.

And these refusals of the stomach are only one side of the story. There are also the stomachs that are too welcoming, too efficient, too delighted to accept nutrition. I'm fat. My father is fat. My grandmother was fat. My aunt was fat, until she became a Weight Watchers leader. Our family stories are wound in a tight nexus around eating and not eating, digesting and not digesting, wondering how to get food to go through the body well, or how to stop it.

But I don't just think it's my family. Culturally, we are obsessed with food and diets. We create ever more luxurious constructions of fat and sugar – anyone fancy a cronut, an arrangement of buttery croissant pastry fried like a doughnut? But at the same time we come up with ever more punishing dietary regimes, everything from fasting two days a week to cutting up healthy stomachs because we find fatness, now, so culturally unacceptable. We watch celebrity chefs on television drizzling chocolate sauce or honey or butter, and associate food with sex from Jamie

Oliver's cheeky Naked Chef to Nigella's flirtatious looks and Gordon Ramsay stripping off his clothes at the start of *The F Word*. And at the same time eating disorders are on the rise, and our cultural beauty ideal becomes thinner and thinner, fuelled by Photoshop, when real human bodies don't look thin enough. Last year alone, there was an 8 per cent rise in young people being admitted to hospital with eating disorders in the UK.

We are worried about food, about digestion, about our stomachs. The intestine is the seat of our anxiety. And our anxieties are meaningful. To be anxious about something is to be obsessed with it. If you have constant anxious thoughts about a topic it's because, on some level, you are enjoying thinking about it. What is it about food and eating that gives such satisfaction in contemplation?

I suspect that it has something to do with Thanatos. It's been remarked before that the Victorians were obsessed with death, but couldn't bear to talk about sex, and we are just the other way around. Inflow, outflow. We talk about food and about youth and about sex. The starts of things. We live in those beginnings, as if it could be the first day of spring forever. If we keep on worrying and worrying about food – am I eating enough, or too much, is it the right sort – we can just flush our shit away in a clean tide of water and never think about it, or what it represents, again. If we focus on youth, we can send our elderly to nursing homes and not have to look at them