



this is my

body

ZINE 2020

**women of color exploring
narratives of self and body in the
midst of pandemic**

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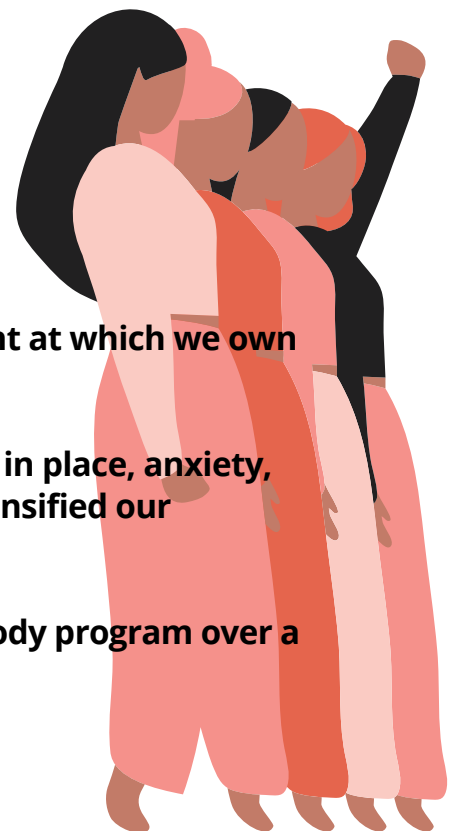
ABOUT NOVALIA COLLECTIVE



We are a hybrid team of educators, facilitators, storytellers, organizers, strategists, and network builders. Our team works across cultural and geographical differences to strengthen communities to connect, collaborate, and thrive.

We work with partners to thoughtfully craft and design programs, initiatives, and strategic plans that work best for their business or community.

ABOUT THE ZINE



This is my body is about starting the conversation at the point at which we own and honor our bodies and our stories.

COVID-19 has quickly changed and shifted our world. Shelter in place, anxiety, stress, health conditions, and our past experiences have intensified our relationship with our bodies.

This zine was developed with participants of the this is my body program over a three-week workshop period.

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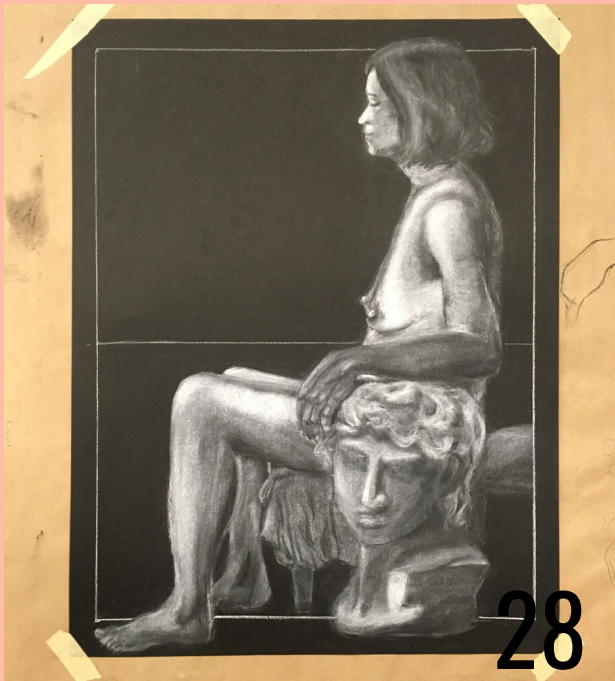
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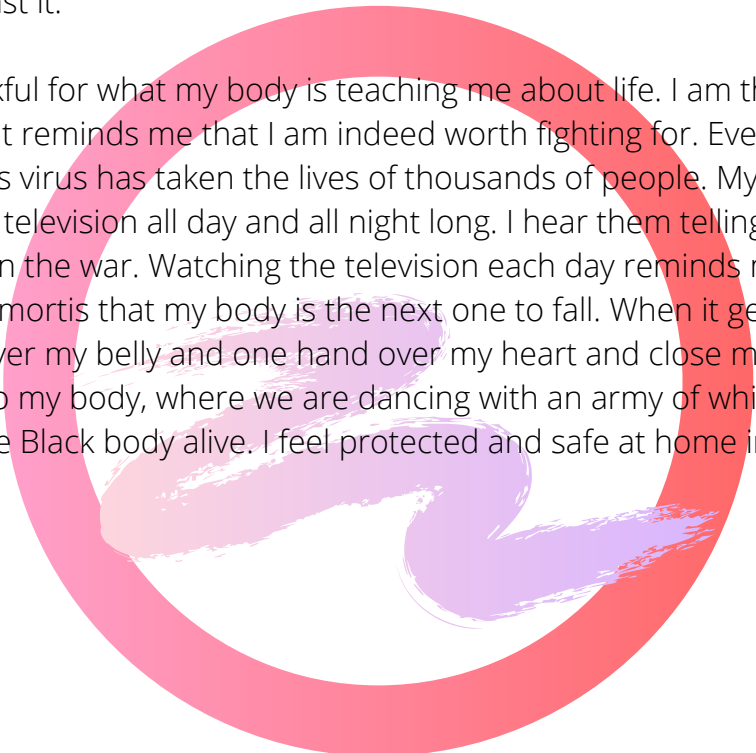
THE ARMY WITHIN

TYLER BREWINGTON

My body danced and danced through the revolution of this pandemic. As I dance, I sweat, and I feel the power of my hips moving back and forth. The sweat flies off me and runs into my eyes, blinding me from this reality of doom. It's just me and my body in the disco inferno of Club Quarantine. I can feel my velveteen heart pumping and flowing fresh blood throughout me, giving me another dose of vitality and cleansing me of fear. I can feel joy rising from my feet all the way to the tips of my fingers. My arms rotate to the cadence of the music like solar powered windmills, and with every eight-count, my body regenerates energy from itself and the music.

The faster I move, the more the heat rises from within me and meshes with the coolness of the stale indoor air. My toes stretch and ground themselves into the earth as I balance my weight onto the balls of my feet. The feeling of taking up space, even on this creaky oak wood floor, feels luxurious at a time where we cannot go outside. Underneath the unshaven hairs on my calves, there is a firmness in my tissues that lets me know I am stronger than before. Even here, I feel the steady assurance that I can trust myself and my body not to fall. I can remember when my body could not trust me and I could not trust my body, but nobody is in the wrong anymore. It all feels so right. It feels good to work with my body and not against it.

Truly, I am thankful for what my body is teaching me about life. I am thankful for the army within me that reminds me that I am indeed worth fighting for. Every night on the news, I see how this virus has taken the lives of thousands of people. My mother loves to watch the news on television all day and all night long. I hear them telling us that staying at home is how we win the war. Watching the television each day reminds me to fight through the feeling of rigor mortis that my body is the next one to fall. When it gets to be too much, I place one hand over my belly and one hand over my heart and close my eyes. I breathe,, and I return back to my body, where we are dancing with an army of white blood cells, fighting to keep one Black body alive. I feel protected and safe at home in my body.



Somehow each day, my alveoli converts fear into hope and fills my lungs up with the possibilities for a better future. Now more than ever, I don't fight what works for me and my body. I love the sensation of ice-cold water flowing down my throat, that satiates my thirsts and nourishes my body. My body is a repurposed wonderland that takes the water that I drink, flows it through me, and out of me in my sweat. I am in wonder of how my body gives and takes, and how my body is showing me how to give of myself and take some of myself for me.

When my Black toes touch the soil of this good brown earth, I am reminded of my ancestors that stood on this same earth, cloaked in strength, courage, and wisdom in spite of every war, genocide, and atrocity committed against their bodies. As I stand on this side of the tender and sacred earth, I am reminded of the interconnectedness of body and earth, spirit and air, fire and blood, and water and wisdom that exists within me and around me and connects me to other bodies in this universe and beyond. As I dance, my body raises up a hallelujah, an ode to hope and vitality that lives in my body in the midst of death and fear in the world around me. Even if the television and these four walls taunt me, I will dance until my mourning transforms into the morning sunlight.

Once I tire myself out, I take a hot shower, dry myself off, and dress my body in shea butter. I protect the glow by wrapping myself in my fuzzy, red bathrobe. I lay my body down, pray, and everything within me feels at peace. I am waiting for DJ Spotify to play a slow jam that will make my body feel like a sweet dream. I faintly hear my favorite song playing in the background of my room. I smile as I nod my head to the beat and nod off into sleep, into the discotech in my dreams. As I let go of the conscious present, I trust the army within me will keep me dancing on the dance floor until the last song of the night plays. The last thing that I hear in my mind is a small still voice that reminds me to remember, for this is how your body will survive a pandemic.



My favorite quarantine jam

ABOUT THIS PIECE

This piece was written as an ode to express gratitude to my body during the pandemic. Dance has been a way for me to hold onto joy and keep myself mentally and physically strong at this time. - Tyler Brewington



*“Words mean more
than what is set down
on paper. It takes the
human voice to infuse
them with deeper
meaning”*

- MAYA ANGELOU

VOICE MATTERS

NATASHA LOWERY

I am a writer. I surround myself with words, take comfort in their malleability. But, with pen in hand, they have abandoned me. So I am stuck, unable to define vulnerable: the concept, the word.

I am equally, a feeler. So I trace the vulnerable in me, the times my body grows, shakes, flies, drowns, blooms, wilts. The times my body feels. Perhaps the answer lies inside.

Mama

"Listen to the soft parts within you," she said. "The ones that guide you from your belly, your womb." She touched me there, palm warm against my skin. "Then you will never stray."

This is what my mother taught me as a child: that wisdom lives within me.

Friend

I am a story, a voice, a body. Seventeen, just like you. Unique, just like you. We swell to breaking point, heads so large with the potential of college, the endless freedom to define ourselves. And then one day you tell me:

"You are so lucky you get to check more than one box."

This is what you teach me: that my body is only defined by tick marks.

Mama

At the kitchen table, I balance equations. An open letter in her fingers begins to shake. her muscles sharpen, slicing through the quiet, and my vision blurs. Dad walks in:

"I don't get it, is she retarded or something?" She brandishes the letter in his face, a solitary B consumes the page.

This is what my mother taught me as a teenager: that I am not enough.

Assaulter

I am free, I am young, I am happy. We come together to celebrate spring, the end of exams. Drunk and in love with the night I open my mind to you and we talk for hours. Dizzy I want to go home so you take me.

And then nothing.

I wake up legs open, sex aching.

This is what you teach me: that my body can never be closed to you if my mind is open.

Mama

For three days you float, resting on a sea of flowers. The sun streams in but my body is cold. On the third day they come, the people of your past, and gather around your body. We swaddle you in the colors of a hundred flowers. We sing you out the door, voices thick, strong, so that you might hear them on your journey.

This is what my mother taught me at twenty-two: there is music still at the end of the world.

Mentor

I am motherless, I am teacher, I am healer. New to this place, new to each other, we walk on eggshells, test boundaries, learn of our origins.

"Where are you from?"

So I tell you a story. The story of my lineage, of my family

"That's why you look exotic."

I fall silent and you laugh, clapping me on the shoulder to ease the tension.

This is what you taught me: that my body is a joke, an ice breaker.

Mama

At night she visits me. "Listen to my voice," she says. It is still here, still strong. In every dream she is different. Sometimes her body is thin, wasted. Others, her face is full, smiling. But every time she comes, she tells me a story from across the veil.

This is what my mom teaches me now: that I am not alone.

Confidant

I am an opinion, a perspective, a choice. You come to visit, after many years. I make you rice, adobo. We share this city for a time. White man's guilt clings to you, and so you speak loud, often, to silence the persistent buzz.

One day you tell me I am wrong. You drown my voice in a sea of your opinions. Waterlogged, it cannot rise again.

This is what you teach me: that my body does not matter if your voice is louder.

One day my mother came to me in a vision. "It is time," she said. "Time to be vulnerable, to know it. It is time to write your own story."

"But how?"

"Listen to your body. You will know what to take, and what to leave behind."

And so I write:

Mama,

I have wisdom, but I must remember how to find it.

Friend,

I have width, depth. So much that it cannot be contained in a little white box.

Mama,

I have worth, though you may not always see it.

Assaulter,

I have the power to say no, to open my mind my heart, and still to close my body.

Mama,

I have a voice, even at the end of the world.

Mentor,

I don't have to be your joke. Do not seek comfort in the labels you throw at me.

Mama,

I have you near me, always.

Confidant,

My voice is not lesser than yours.

Mama,

Your voice is strong; I hear you always. With it, you teach me the language of my body. I love you, and this is my story.

Mama,

I have something to say. Sit down and listen.



"to mama, j'taime"

Photo Credit: Natasha Lowery

ABOUT THIS PIECE

In "Voice Matters", I trace the vulnerable in my body, searching for, and reclaiming the lessons learnt. -Natasha Lowery

I'VE BEEN PREPARING FOR THIS MY ENTIRE LIFE.

JOYCE WEST

Adversity and an extreme demand for resilience is more familiar than not to me as an immigrant. My body has always felt comfortable and positively energized in times of crisis. I watched my parents struggle and fight for every small victory in their path towards realizing some kind of American dream.

What we lacked in material wealth, I made up for in spiritual wealth. I grew up in a safe, stable environment where my education and development were prioritized. From this stable platform, I learned to channel motivation and hard work into learning opportunities. I learned first hand that putting effort into things would usually yield great results, especially by watching my Dad, whose determination showed me that anything was possible if you pushed hard enough.

When the pandemic hit, my husband and I stocked up on food and supplies, bought bleach to start disinfecting everything, purchased water storage, and halted all social interaction. We were prepared.

There was one thing we weren't prepared for: a few days later, I got the call: my Mom had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Coronavirus was here to stay, posing a serious and possibly fatal health risk to those over 60 years of age. It was the absolute worst time to be going to the hospital, let alone spending a week in the

hospital. My mind raced to "This isn't happening; I can't lose her too." A year prior, my Dad had passed away from small intestine cancer. I took several deep breaths, and visualized all the times I had emerged victorious and stronger than before. My nervous system relaxed completely and I was safe, knowing with every cell of my body that it would all be okay.

She was in surgery the following Friday, after we made the decision that the risk of not getting surgery and having her cancer grow was more threatening than her chances of getting the virus during her hospital stay. While I knew things would turn out alright, making these heavy "life or death" decisions did drain my energy, causing me to pass out from exhaustion by 10pm each night.

My body was already de-sensitized to the collective existential anxiety of everyone affected by the pandemic; as an empath I could feel the local anxiety of my community, as well as waves of instability with each round of layoffs announced by yet another company. I skipped the grieving and denial and took the express train to acceptance, creating an action plan and visualizing her healing. When you're an immigrant pursuing your dreams, failure, giving up, or breaking down is not an option. The only option is **succeeding**.

I see the cliché on greeting cards where it says, "What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?" I find so little value in that question; instead, I ask "How would you approach things if you knew that failure wasn't an option?" Failing at making the right choices for her health was not an option, so "Mom cannot die, either from lung cancer or getting coronavirus while in the hospital" became my mantra.

I focused on what I could control to de-risk the situation: I sent her to the hospital with disinfecting wipes, masks, gloves, and disposable plates and utensils so she wouldn't need to touch any of the hospital's items. I called the hospital and advocated for them to require that everyone going into her room wear a mask and gloves. Shockingly, that was not a general requirement at the hospital since they were running low on personal protective equipment. My husband drove 5 hours to various places to scrounge up nine N95 masks, which we gave to the hospital nurses. I pleaded with the hospital staff to make a huge exception and allow placement of a Molekule air filter in her room. I probably sounded crazy.

When you put your heart into something completely, you have peace of mind that you can let go of the outcome. Regardless of what happened and what the outcome of the surgery was, I knew that I had done my absolute best in taking care of Mom.

My Mom is now doing great. The cancer did not spread and is likely cured. She didn't even take any Tylenol for her pain, because she is so resilient and she has a really positive attitude. She has a lot in her emotional bank account and hence some discomfort doesn't bother her.

The month before her diagnosis, we went to Vegas for her first time, and she had an absolute blast; the Cirque du Soleil shows blew her away. Her will to live comes from not being done with experiencing and enjoying life with her family and friends. My parents taught me not to run away at the first sign of difficulty, but to see its face and work with it. Sometimes the rewards that are hard earned are even sweeter.

My father taught me to go all in on everything and to never give up or believe that anything was too difficult. This immigrant body goes two steps forward, then takes two more steps forward. I am proud to continue his story and make meaning of his values and lessons. He prepared me for this all my life.

ABOUT THIS PIECE

This is my story of how my upbringing as an immigrant has cultivated an unwavering strength to handle whatever may come.

- Joyce West

WHAT LIES BENEATH THE SKIN

ZABDI MAYNEZ

While I eat breakfast, my sister eats beside me. She's watching Netflix on our T.V., and I can't help but think she's always at peace. At her age, my life was full of emotional chaos and internal turmoil. But her presence helped me. I became an older sister ready to protect, and because of her, I could look at my younger self as a little sister.

I see a little girl, six. She's quiet and observes with dark brown eyes. She sits alone during recess, incapable of connecting with anyone. When she goes home, she is alone again. She relieves her nervous tension drawing, wishing she had a friend. She thinks and remembers that she does have a friend. They play together, but it's a secret. At night she doesn't know why she can't sleep. She thinks about her friend. They play in a dark room with the T.V. on, but the moment gets swallowed by a demonic shadow. She wakes up the next morning, having to build the courage to confess to her mom she peed her bed again. She hates getting in trouble and punishes herself. She doesn't understand why this keeps happening. Confused, she finds solace in her loneliness.

I see a teenage girl, fourteen. She's doing great. She has friends, interests, and excellent academics. She continually reminds herself she is blessed to be in her position. But, she doesn't know why a persistent feeling keeps poking her. She's frustrated. Her mind is working hard for success, but her body demands answers. There has to be a logical reason why she feels this way. She stares out her window agitated watching the neighborhood sleep. "Why do I feel this way?" Her efforts to succeed feel like they're not good enough. Desperately looking for answers, she gets high and acts promiscuously. Hitting a harder wall, she stops recognizing herself. Her mirror shows a distorted figure, fluctuating in weight, looking back at her.

I see a girl, sixteen, lying in her bed. Her eyes are drowsy, and her expression worn out. She feels like she tried everything, but it wasn't enough. Her friends grew distant, and her parents don't trust her. Weeks, hours, and minutes begin to feel the same to her. She's stuck in a loop of staying in bed, always tired. Two years pass and her consciousness pinches her, but she ignores it. Fatigued, the woman closes her eyes, entering a space between times.

I see a woman, eighteen. She sits in a dungeon alone. Looking outside her cell, she wonders how she got here.

Her subconscious responds, "Don't look at that!"

Startled, the woman sees a key and asks, "Why?"
"It's the only way out. I am protecting you."
"But I don't want to be here."

"Trust me. You're not ready to leave."

With uncertainty, she grabs the key, unlocking the door and pushing it open. Slowly she walks into a dark space. The skin on her neck shivers. "Where am I?" To her left, a small light barely illuminates the space. Hesitant to look, she commits. Her complexion pales, and her stomach turns. Winded, she looks down and asks, "What is that?"

Across from her, the demon stands. Her body responds; she's afraid. Hideous as the demon may be, she approaches it. The demon grabs her arm and takes her through space. Jolted, they land in a room. Her body is uncomfortable. She recognizes a flickering T.V. and the shadow of a man and a little girl. A sinking pain settles in her chest. And, for the first time, she can see the festering wound in her heart. She touches it. "Ouch!" It's real. The demon sucks the experience back into its mouth and holds her hand. Her thoughts are barren. The demon hides the memory, so she can accept what happened. The atmosphere is still. Time is slow, but she still feels pain. It is subsiding and reducing by a thousand. Her pain stops festering. She understands.

Suddenly she feels the graze of soft hair on her hand, and she looks down. Big dark brown eyes meet her gaze. Their innocence blinds her. Tears build up while she watches the little girl start to dance and playfully entertain her. The woman places her thumbs on the girl's forehead and strokes her hair, embracing her for a moment. For eternity. Loved, the girl clings to her and guides her into the light.

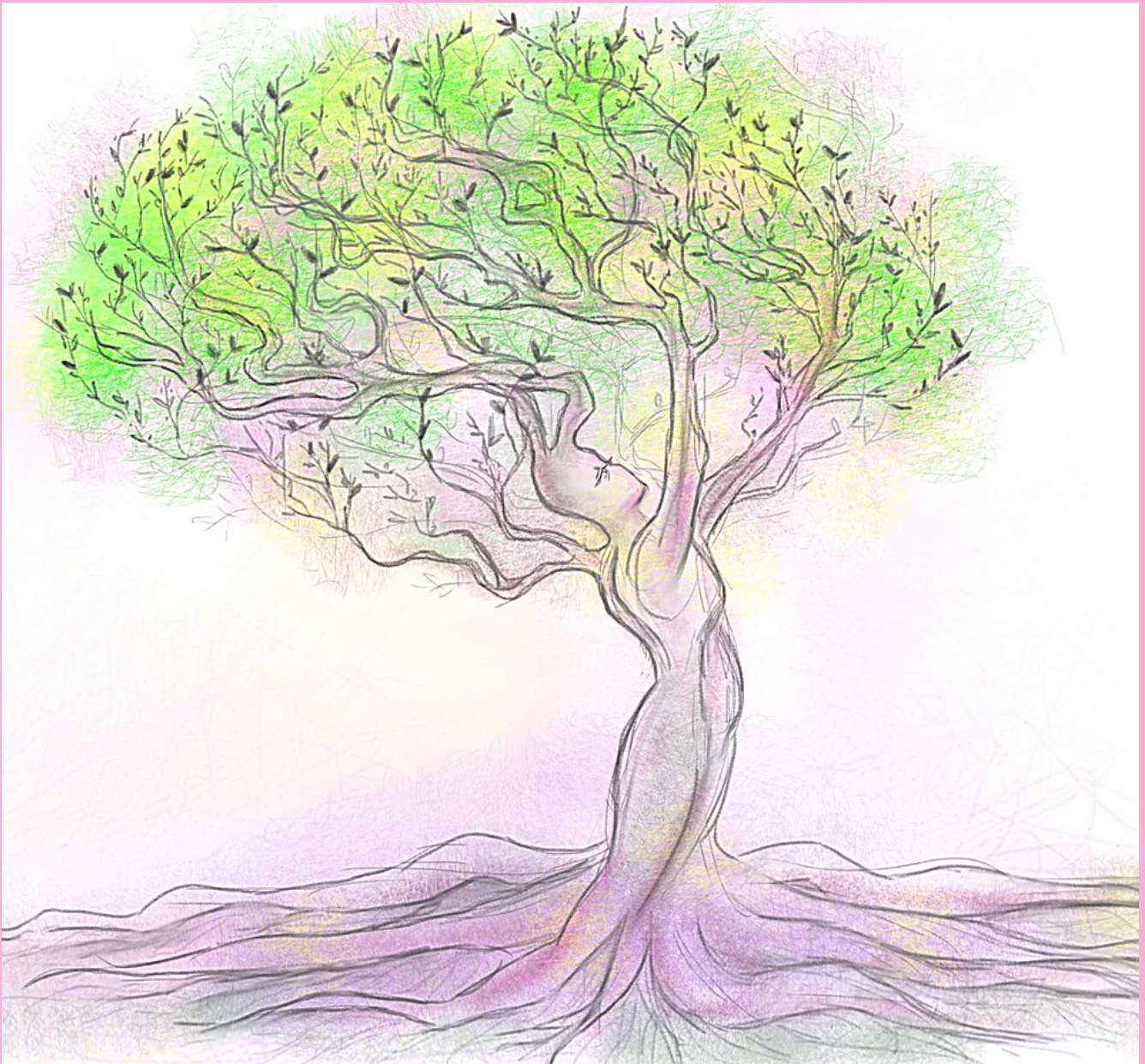


ABOUT THIS PIECE

My written piece, "What Lies Beneath the Skin," is a love letter to my younger self. I was and still am inspired by individuals who can take trauma and use it as a source of healing for themselves and others. - Zabdi Maynez

In nature, nothing is perfect and everything is perfect. Trees can be contorted, bent in weird ways, and they're still beautiful.

-Alice Walker



"SEMPITERNAL"
BY: CHARLENE PHAM

SWEET AT THE CORE BUT I'M NOT YOUR EYE CANDY

LENA KWAK

The sweetness of a woman is deceptively powerful. Gentleness, unselfishness and generosity that can coat you inside out with syrupy warmth. There was once a time that I associated weakness with the word "docile." Over the years, I have come to recognize the convergence of soft kindness and Herculean strength in women. At the center lies beautifully soft, supple sugary goodness that sometimes is encapsulated in a protective shell. How thick this layer is depends on her lived experience. An extra coating for hardships faced for self preservation.

Like a Cadbury egg.

Once you get past the hard shell, there is a gooey center. Saccharine that ached your molars. Be patient as you pull away the foil and hold her in warm hands to melt. If you're lucky, you will experience such delightful tenderness that gives you a sugar high. How incredibly honeyed the love of a woman feels. Without a shell she feels a frisson of excitement, both fear and thrill.

Letting your guard down comes with some risk. To ooze out into a natural tooth aching sweet self, one is in a vulnerable state. It is difficult to stay in this delicious soft form when you are constantly bludgeoned with impossible expectations. It is exhausting to balance yourself on the tightrope between being a strong yet desirable woman. Burning mental calories on every calorie consumed over a lifetime. Having to temper oneself to make a man feel whole.

Be small. Men like slender women who make them feel strong. Yes, and be filled out in all the right places because men like feminine bodies.

Be innocent. Men like princesses who need rescuing.
Yes, and be sexy. Just not too provocative because men don't marry sluts.

Be nurturing. Men like women who are friendly and warm.
Yes, and be ambitious. Just not too opinionated because men don't like stubbornness.

Be everything and nothing at the same time, they said.

For the first time in a long time, I feel a calmness wash over me and three words blaze through my mind.

Go fuck yourself.

I refuse to exist in relations with your ideals. I am not here to cater to your gaze and preferences. You say I am almost perfect, but not enough. I am no object to customize or tweak. Your displeasure holds no bearing over me because I know now how to savor my colorful richness in character.

I am sweet to the core, but I am not your eye candy.

ABOUT THIS PIECE

Have you ever been told by someone you love that you are almost perfect, but not enough? - Lena Kwak

WHY I CAN'T GET A CAT

SHIN HYUN NAM

Content Warning: Assisted Suicide

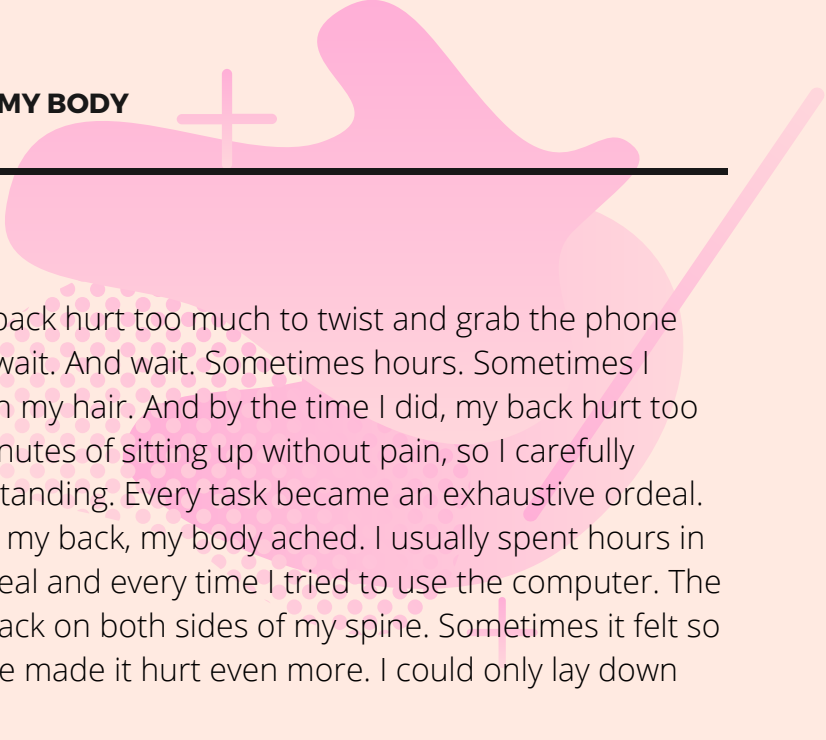
"If you want a dog or cat so badly, why not get one?," my friend asks. I say that I can't handle the responsibility, and I'm unsure if I can afford to, which is true, but it's not the main reason. I'm not sure if I'm going to be alive in a year. I am afraid of how my friends will respond, so I haven't told them. Not sure if I will.

Shortly after graduating from college, almost 30 years ago, severe fatigue became a chronic part of my life. Those all-day hikes I loved to take through the windy streets of SF that I never tired of, started to tire me... for days. Sometimes a trip to the grocery store meant a day in bed. It was as if I was in a perpetual state of recovering from a flu that I never had - when you're getting better, but over do it, and land back in bed. Overwhelming fatigue, crippling body aches.

But it wasn't the flu and for 6 years doctors couldn't figure it out. Until they did. Fibromyalgia and myofascial pain syndrome, autoimmune and muscular disorders. For those of you who don't know what fascia is, think of when you have cut chicken - the thin white film that encases the muscles. In the human body, that film encases every muscle. And in my body that film thickens and stiffens. They don't know why. The result is agonizing pain throughout the body. Every 4 weeks my doctors take a needle and pull it in and out of my fascia a few hundred times all over my body to break it up in the areas that have hardened. My fascia is so hard and so thick that during the needling it makes noises. My doctor calls patients like me "crunchy." And sometimes my muscles are so hard and ropey that they grab onto the needle, making it hard to pull out. My doctor has never seen anything like it.

After sitting at a movie theater, you might be familiar with the stiffness you get in your back and legs. Or you might get the occasional knots in your neck or back after a day at the computer. The pain is similar, but more intense. After walking around, or getting a massage, the aches go away. But with myofascial pain syndrome, the pain never completely goes away. It might feel better for a while, but it's with you morning, noon, and night. Sometimes even even the slightest touch hurts.

About 5 months ago I had to go off a pain and sleep medication because it was causing stomach problems. The pain became unbearable, and I was only able to sleep a few hours a night. This went on for months. I started to understand why sleep deprivation is used as a form of torture. After a few days I lost my ability to think in full sentences or to think rationally.



Days turned into a series of long challenges. My back hurt too much to twist and grab the phone behind me. I'd wait until the pain stopped. And I wait. And wait. Sometimes hours. Sometimes I didn't have the energy to wash my face and brush my hair. And by the time I did, my back hurt too much to put on moisturizer. I had roughly ten minutes of sitting up without pain, so I carefully rationed the amount of time spent sitting up or standing. Every task became an exhaustive ordeal. By the time I prepared and ate breakfast, my hip, my back, my body ached. I usually spent hours in bed recovering. The same happened for every meal and every time I tried to use the computer. The pain felt like sheets of metal rammed down my back on both sides of my spine. Sometimes it felt so intense I couldn't rest or even watch TV. The noise made it hurt even more. I could only lay down and wait. I became a very patient person.

With a very competent team of pain, sleep, and integrative specialists I tried a number of supplements, medications, and treatments with limited success. Then I saw a show called, *Mary Kills People*, about a doctor who secretly helps people with terminal illnesses end their lives. Most of them have to do so in secret because their loved ones would probably try to interfere. The main character is a horrible person, but what she does is not wrong. I am not terminally ill, but I have been in constant pain for almost 30 years now. Most of the last 5 months have been the worst, and something that no one should be forced to endure.

I started to look into countries that allow euthanasia for non-terminal patients. I first considered a number of methods for suicide on my own. Using a method that would not fail was imperative. I would not want to survive and be even more miserable than I am now. There are few methods I have access to, aside from using a gun, that can achieve this objective. But I prefer to die in a peaceful, non-violent manner. And I don't want to do this in a secretive manner, as if I have something to be ashamed of. What do I have to be ashamed of? So far, the only way I have found to die in the manner of my choosing is by going to a country that allows euthanasia for non-terminal patients.

I am perturbed at the amount of resistance to all euthanasia, but especially euthanasia for non-terminal patients. Why does the concept of controlling what happens to your body end for the physically ill? I should be able to decide whether I give birth to a child, but not whether I suffer unending pain for the rest of my life? The prevailing belief is that no one would willingly end their life without being mentally ill. But what sane rational person would want to live in my condition? Spend just one week in my shoes and tell me why I would want to live this.

I am not depressed. I am probably the least depressed I have ever been in my 51 years of life. Being depressed would be a luxury from where I am now. When you're in this much pain, you don't have the energy to be depressed. Your only thoughts are, "I want the pain to end."

I am afraid of telling friends how I feel because I fear that they will invalidate my desires as simply a manifestation of depression or mental illness. Or that they will try to have me locked up. Or, that they will try to make me feel guilty or selfish for wanting to do this. Or worse yet, they will abandon me - perhaps out of desire to protect themselves.

After understanding my reasons, I hope they come to realize that this is really the best thing for me. If they really care for me, they should be happy for me, that I get to finally end my suffering. If I go through with this, I would like my death to be a celebration of my life, not a reason for sadness, and I hope they can be a part of it.

I have been feeling better physically the last few weeks, but I don't know if, or for how long that will last. For that reason, I am not taking an immediate course of action. But I won't take assisted suicide off the table for the future. This is my life, and this is my body.

ABOUT THIS PIECE

I hadn't talked about it with anyone, but had been thinking about it for quite some time. I was afraid of what the reactions would be. -Shin Hyun Nam

WHAT COLOR AM I?

BRENDA MUTUMA

What color am i? I asked the sun.
It depends on where I am, he said.
Or where in the world you are, he burned
How long in front of me you stand

What color am i? I asked my camera
It depends on the lighting you use
It depends on the person you stand next to
What filter you normally choose

What color am i? I asked the makeup artist
They say "don't use your arm, try your chest."
Match the color of that area to your face
Even if it looks different from the rest

What color am i? I asked my friends.
"Team dark-skin!" two yell in conclusion
In Jamaica, you're brown, another explained
My mom calls it color confusion

What color am i? I asked the beautician
Who offers cream to make my face bright
It conceals, reduces, eliminates dark spots
Does this mean it will make my skin light?

What color am i? I asked the magazine
Why are white women's shades always in?
Why do Asian women get to hide from the sun
And popularize things like glass skin

What color am i? I ask the mirror
After the makeup, the cleanser, the peel,
The oil, the acid, the toner, the serum
All primers to make my skin feel

What color am i? my brother asked me
Who swears he's a light-skinted hue
With all his girl problems, I say to him
"It doesn't really matter for you."

What color am i? I asked the little girl
Sidewalk-selling some cold lemonade
I saw her mother, and before I could speak
She pulled her back under the shade

You are the color of history, honey
I told her when her mama left
Of the rallies, the records, the trials overcome
Most people would love to forget

You are the color of dreams, I whispered
Born with the courage to believe
That you are the color of faith fulfilled
Surpassing the things they perceive

"Now, what color am I?" I asked the girl
As the daylight grew distant and duller
She told me she didn't have real answers for me
Since the things I named weren't really colors

"Earth," she muttered as I walked away
I turned back as if what she said hurt
"You mean Earth-toned?" I ask for clarity
To make sure she didn't just mean 'dirt'

"The wood of the trees, that hold up the leaves
That grows into itself from the ground
And the prismatic soil that refuses to die
Holding every treasure we've ever found"

Touché, I nod in concession
Realizing the debate had been won
What color are we then? I ask,
learning my lesson
She told me to go ask the sun.

ABOUT THIS PIECE

"what color am i?" is a poem addressing the quiet yet persistent quest for beauty in a world where the very shade of a woman's skin matters. The piece highlights the nuanced subjectivity of this quest, and the underlying uncertainty that stems from it all. - brenda mutuma



UNHEARD WORDS

JENNIFER NG

They said that I would have trouble making friends. They said that I would be happier reading books at home. They said that I wouldn't perform on stage—whether to present at work or to entertain others. They said all these things and I believed them.

When I was two, I didn't have words. Standing in the kitchen, I yelled noises that sounded like words, but they weren't. My sympathetic parents didn't understand. "What do you want?" they asked as they pointed at the rice bowl, bananas, and bread. I tried again. And again. But why couldn't they understand that I wanted raisins. My face turned red and I collapsed into a tantrum. It was my earliest memory of my life. But it was not my last memory for not being heard.

My mother fretted about my lack of language development and sought help from childhood specialists. Test after test, they concluded that I had a superior IQ: "She's very good at counting and can name all the body parts." But when asked open-ended questions, I would stare and say nothing at all. The specialist concluded that I was "a quiet, cooperative girl" and "content to stay silent." They said that I had expressive language disorder—an inability to communicate verbally. This came with years of speech therapy, a recommended treatment. In my young mind, I only saw that I was different.

In the years that followed, despite being a straight A student, I failed in Participation. That is, anything performative—spoken or physical—were challenges. In PE, I failed at hitting the volleyball. In English, I hid in terror, worried that a teacher would call on me to read aloud and I would need to raise my voice above a whisper. During lunch, girls rejected me from their group, because I never said anything at all.

But the written word was different. I mailed a poem so that a bully could feel my pain. I drafted an amateur screenplay for my sister to act. I wrote a story about magic that could quiet a class. I anonymously submitted class feedback that tests should have essays instead of multiple choice.

When AOL arrived, my life changed. In chat rooms, I found the "a/s/l" question ridiculous, because age, sex, and location did not define me. I would reply "4^2 / no, I have a headache / middle of nowhere". I didn't learn how to type through Mavis Beacon, but rather I learned to type through conversation. I could be anyone—the popular girl, the confident extrovert, the ambitious writer, the dancer. A thirty-something year old man thought that I was in my twenties and said that my words were lyrical. I laughed hysterically and never talked to him again.

When I was twenty, a boy from Michigan fell in love with me. By this time, I made friends easily online. My thoughts became alive on the screen in a different way than in person. People commented when they met me “IRL” that I didn’t match who they expected. “You are so articulate online,” they said.

I knew what they were saying, as shame seized my body, but I shook my head. “It’s all me,” I said.

I invited the boy to visit California over the summer. He didn’t mind my other self. In the late evening, like I had done for years, I logged onto AIM and chatted with online friends. As he stood behind me, he said, “Jenn?”

“Yeah,” I said, lost in the conversations.

“But I am here,” he whispered behind me. “I am right here.”

This is the part of the story where I overcame my weakness and had a heart-to-heart conversation with him. That in a few years, I found the self confidence through good friends and therapy to become the person that I wanted to be. That didn’t happen.

In front of the computer, the boy saw all of me—the silent one, the expressive one, the opinionated. Yet, with my back to him, all I wanted was the boy to be inside the computer, spilling words over me, while I was safe at home on the other side of the screen.

ABOUT THIS PIECE

Once upon a time, I was a quiet little girl with unheard words. Although I have learned to speak up, the shelter-in-place order reminds me of how I found my way. - Jennifer Ng

ART 340: DRAWING II

MELISSA BUI



Artwork By: Melissa Bui

Have you ever looked at an uninterrupted body?
Allowed your gaze to melt along every natural curve.
When its stillness was only disrupted in intervals.
Rise and descent of the chest,
Expanding and shrinking the spaces between each pore,
Underwear indents fade.

I draped the Somerset Satin - White over my chest as I graced
my easel.
Stripping it off my body, he stripped off his robe.

I draft, erase, outline, erase, shade, erase, flip my paper to
start over.
A line, doomed to remain still, attempts to capture his
persona
Upon a top fabricated as a flat plane.

Silence was disrupted.
"Bodies do not compose of straight lines. Our bodies, our
flesh, have curves and folds as big or small as our eyes can
see."

My eyes inched over his skin as my hands inched over my
easel.
Gradually,
Patiently,
Observing,
Admiring.

Is this what it takes to give life?

On days where I feel out of place in my body,
I reject straight lines.

I take a glass to the surface of my skin and watch the way it plays like an accordion with every
twist and turn of my wrist
Singing "I am alive."

On days where I feel out of place in my body,
My eyes inch over my skin watching it breathe.
Watch life transpire,
Be.

On days where I feel out of place in my body,
I lay my hand down on a still surface.
Feel the force of my fingers pressing down,
My palm attempts to merge with its opponent.
Yet I still feel air among the lines of my flesh.
Rivers still move through my heart line and headline.

When I strip off my clothes to falling sheets,
Every cotton thread tickles the hairs on my legs.

My thighs slide like a slab of pancakes
As gravity kisses it to the surface of my bed.

My breasts take a form of something flat, rounded, lopsided.

My stomach, once slump, now placid like a pond.
Awaiting disruption to cause a ripple.

Consider it a superpower to be a shapeshifter.
Consider it a superpower to have a body expand and shrink,
Bend, and stretch,
Supple, and fluent.

If I was up on plinths,
What would they capture?

The scar on my left knee when Danny's mom used to babysit.
Fooled by the sounds of my friends during a game of Marco Polo,
I ran knee-first into a wall, shattering a seashell night light.

The 12 dots inked in a circle on the ring finger of my right hand.
Subscribed to when intoxicated, on a ratty chestnut couch.
To sitting under the dim light of a dinner table,
My roommate, needle in hand.

The tan on my feet resembling two white lines.
A souvenir of the year I've lived solely in Birkenstocks.
A tan that some correlate to the skin of a zebra.
A tan I correlate to safari rides and chapatis.

Would they draw my body in curved lines, anchored by the circle of my joints?
Darken the callus on my feet?
Feather unapologetic stray hairs?
Lighten where the winters bring ash to my hands?

Would they read between the lines of my skin?
To unmask a figure that holds memories and emotions
That are repressed by the stillness of the moment.

Or would they be distracted
Because my eyes blink away the dust from the rusted pipes overhead,
Skin around my knuckles wrinkle with each stretch to fight static.
Negative space enclosed by my elbows and torso twitch.

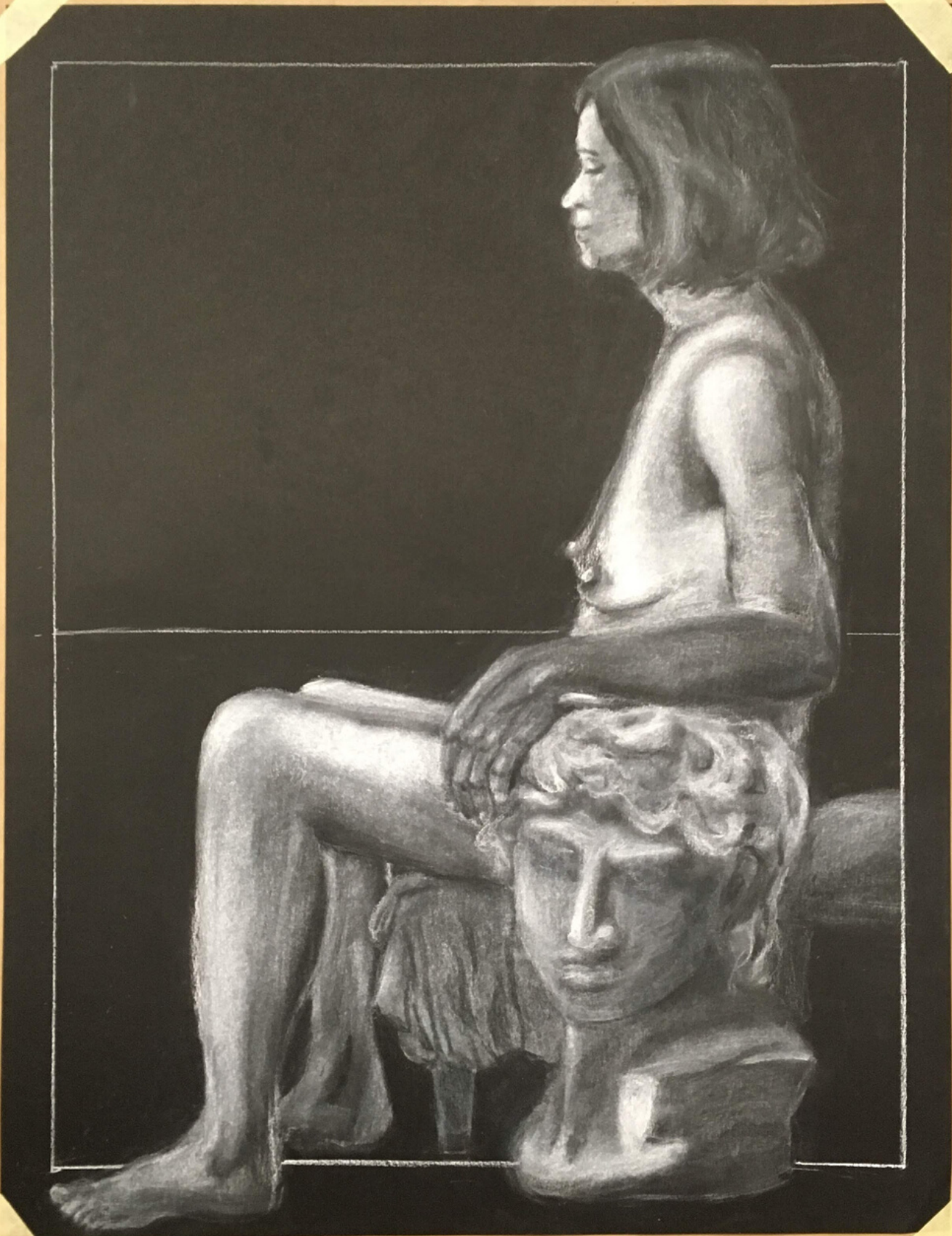
My body is a live performance captured still.
My body is a storybook, ready to tell.
My body is a sculpture, chipped, and shattered.

Only when your gaze is gradual, patient, observing, admiring,
May you have what it takes to give life.

ABOUT THIS PIECE

This piece explores the interpretation of our naked body as a practice of interpreting works of art — with love, admiration, and depth. - Melissa Bui

WHISTLER'S
MOTHER



Artwork By: Melissa Bui

the past must be remembered to guide our future

The best thing I've done for myself:
Go down a road that was always in front of me;
Explore two sides of myself

I learned how invaluable connection is
What an honor it is to weave my story to others

Stories have reminded me
How imperfection results in vastly more
Intriguing and stunning beauty

No matter how long it has been
This process reminds me of the strength
Of my body, my voice

I finally feel like I have permission to write
without feeling like I have to censor myself.

I have come a long way
from what people expected me to be.

ABOUT THIS PIECE

This is a collective poem that was created by compiling the individual reflections of each performers of *this is my body* after the completion of the workshops. The poem was compiled by Odelia Younge.

CONNECT WITH US

ABOUT THIS IS MY BODY

This is my body started as a program grounded in courageous storytelling, self-exploration, and community to support women of color in developing, writing, and performing their own one-woman show. Our authors and performers came together as a collective that helped each of them dive deep into their stories and come away with pieces that articulated an important story in their life.

WORK WITH SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

Social and emotional learning (SEL) provides students a foundation for safe and positive learning, and enhances their ability to succeed in school, careers, and life.

Our program supports students through the process of finding, crafting, and sharing their stories. We work with students to write and perform an original piece that illustrates who they are as individuals -- their dreams, hopes, aspirations and what they need their education to be to achieve their goals

WORK WITH EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS

To fully transform the workplace experience for members, ERGs should deeply understand the experience of individuals to cultivate a strong sense of community and leverage the power of collective storytelling to address challenges in the workplace and enact change.

Through workshops and/or ongoing facilitation, we work with ERG members to craft and share their stories, strengthen their community, and build the workplace they need to succeed.



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