

THE BODY ARTIST

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THE MELANCHOLY OF ANATOMY

Shelley Jackson

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On May 25, 1961, President Kennedy told the American people, “This nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth.” This statement not only cleared a path for taxpayer’s money, it elevated a genre for a generation. Science fiction rose from the lowlands of pulp to attain a lofty position in “higher” culture. In 1968, Stanley Kubrick, with *2001: A Space Odyssey*, transformed a sci-fi book into a difficult, modernist masterpiece of cinema. Carl Sagan’s 1980 *Cosmos* series legitimized the fantasy of extra-terrestrial life for the mainstream TV audience. Science fiction became a serious genre not only for Phillip K. Dick, J.G. Ballard, and the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem, but sci-fi’s cosmic metaphors have been embraced by almost every author since.

Recently, though, the cosmos has lost its power to provoke the imagination. In a way, it has become quaint. Kitsch, even. Until tragic accidents remind us of their existence, space shuttles take off and land with little or no publicity. In 2001, millionaire Denis Tito trivialized space by becoming the first Space Tourist. This futuristic metaphor has become—forgive me—*retro*.

“Today,” President Clinton said on June 26, 2000, “we are learning the language in which God created life.” This was not the Music of the Spheres he was referring to. This was the

completion of the “rough” mapping of the human genome. Again, this statement raised money (the Human Genome Project got three billion dollars). However, it also gave prominence to a new metaphor and theme for this era. We are no longer afraid of Martians. We are afraid of terrorist Muslims releasing anthrax. Cancer and AIDS scare us not just because they will kill us (lots of things we don’t think about will kill us); they scare us because they take over our cells. This fact seems improbable to us. *Our* cells should be under *our* control, after all. This is our new predicament. Not only are we hurtling through space tethered to a flaming globe, but we are also at the mercy of our cells, which evidently have minds—and agendas—of their own.

This existential space of the interior is the realm of which Shelley Jackson will soon be crowned queen. *The Melancholy of Anatomy* is an ambitious and very strange collection of short stories in which the smaller stuffs of the body are placed prominently outside of it. The stories have titles like “Egg,” “Sperm,” “Cancer,” and “Nerve.” Jackson is quite aware of the shift of theme away from outer space and toward the body. The piece that introduces the collection, “Heart,” sets the tone: “There are hearts bigger than planets: black hearts that absorb light, hope, and dust particles, that eat comets and space probes. Motionless, sullen dirigibles, they hang in the empty space between galaxies. We can’t see them, but we know they’re there, fattening.”

One aspect of the cosmos narrative was linearity. Stephen Hawking has spent the greater part of his career trying to retrace the history of the universe to the “Big Bang,” or, in other words, to the start of the Master Narrative. The way cells and the biosciences behave, on the other hand,

seems one of multilinearity—randomness and chance—not a series of determined events. A cell divides, those two cells divide into four, and so on. Each cell, depending upon its genetic sequence, forms different organs, and they do this simultaneously. The written form that has the capacity to contain so many narratives at once is hypertext.

Shelley Jackson's previous work, *Patchwork Girl*, was first published in 1995, and it is now widely hailed as a classic from the golden age of hypertext. (We are already past the Bronze Age, according to Robert Coover.) *Patchwork Girl* is a modernization of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and, as you may have guessed, it is obsessed with the construction of the body as a multilinear monster of text, material, and metaphor. *The Melancholy of Anatomy*, though printed and bound in the traditional manner of a book, is also, at times, rather multilinear. "Dildo," the funniest story in the collection, is written as an epilogue to a fictional history on the tool, published in 1678. Following this epilogue is an innocently detailed index, with fake page numbers to boot. Another story, "Phlegm," comes complete with appendices, and "Milk" is stitched together from sections of an obliquely referenced *Sky Writer's Phrasebook*.

The slight weakness of *The Melancholy of Anatomy* is that some of the stories tend to follow the same basic formula. "Egg," "Sperm," "Foetus," and "Cancer" all take the given subject of the title, enlarge them, and detail how their physical presence affects their narrators. In "Cancer," for instance, the narrator begins: "The cancer appeared in my living room sometime between eleven and three on a Thursday. I am not sure exactly when..." It is a beginning reminiscent of such classic existential narratives as, "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams..." (*Metamorphosis*, Kafka) and "Mother died today. Maybe it was yesterday, I don't know" (*The Outsider/Stranger*, Camus). This is not necessarily a bad thing.

In Jackson's "Cancer," the cancer grows from "a pink fizz" to "the size of a badger, then a goat, then an ox." Soon the cancer is taking up an entire room, digging through the floorboards and into the ground below the narrator's house, like a tree. The narrator's relationship is at first one of identification—"I knew that in some way I had secreted the cancer, sneezed it from a nostril. It was not from outside. Every success it enjoyed was evidence against me"—and then one of cathartic conflict—"I stepped inside the cancer, hacking around me indiscriminately. The limbs shook only with my own movements."

The twist, as you can see, is that the existential quandary for Jackson is not just the social, or "outside," fabric, but the fabric of the body itself, what the body is made of. The success of these stories is also very similar to the success of classic existential narratives. The protagonist finds him- or herself up against a very strange and socially awkward situation, and, more often than not, they make a mess of it by trying to cope honestly with it. In the grotesque story, "Phlegm," the social world is one in which everyone interacts by spitting out a glob of snot and holding it out for others to touch and mold. This drives the protagonist crazy—as you can imagine. Another group of stories—"Nerve," "Sleep," "Blood," "Milk," and "Fat"—follows a different structure than the four mentioned above. These five stories place the given topic as the landscape in which the characters live and work. In "Nerve," for instance, it is observed: "In the town where George grew up locals believed to this day that a walk in the nerve fields made women ovulate and a handful of freshly cut nerve fibers under the pillow brought true dreams of love." These tales are somewhat like anthropological studies of how the entitled environment affects the social relationships of those living in it, which again is more often than not one of distraught alienation.

Despite the lapse into a vague formula, these stories are aware, precisely told, and quite disturbing. I haven't experienced reading anything so weird yet so poignant on the body since first reading William S. Burroughs's skit on the

talking asshole or Rebecca Brown's early story "Folie à Deux." *The Melancholy of Anatomy* is a fascinating collection detailing the strangeness of our own bodies and the bodily functions of our society.

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