

Feminine Bodies

Best of Creative Nonfiction

Piper Rowley

“There are only three things to be done with a woman. You can love her, suffer for her, or turn her into literature.” – Henry Miller

The world consumes us, feminine bodies. Staring with vacant, critical eyes. Which category do we fit into?

To love a woman, to idealize her and make her inhuman. She is a virgin, a saint, a mother, a daughter. Too precious for sex, too pure for autonomy. They dissect us haphazardly, but with divine purpose.

To suffer for her. She is a whore, single mother, disinterested in men, inedible.

Or worse yet, they turn us into literature. They describe our bodies as beautiful plains. Write songs and novels about how they want to fuck us, devour us, dismiss us, forget us. They compare us to birds, landscapes, nymphs, anything imaginable.

From the great dusty mouths of long-dead men to the crude slurs spat on albums playing on the radio this morning.

They are obsessed with us. Our figures. The female body, not the mind, experience, history. They want to spread our legs and write poetry about what they find there. Like our thighs are highways they journey on, a destination only for them. Cup our breasts, squeeze our hips, bite our necks, bed us or kill us, one of the two.

“Why are women...so much more interesting to men than men are to women?” – Virginia Woolf

She smiles brilliantly from the glossy cover of a three-dollar magazine. The price of confidence, the price of crucifixion. They all do. Identical expressions in their eyes. Pride and fear. Each thigh airbrushed smooth, hair erased, rearranged, color-corrected. Entire inches of their waists have vanished. But their breasts look unusually full, supple and inviting, displayed for every distracted eye to wander to, lust and compare standing in the indifferent lines of grocery lanes. The men who came with their wives, casting quick glances, maybe a disparaging, longing comment. The wives who hungrily lap up the captions. *Lose 20 Pounds! Trim Your Fat! Tone Your Abs!* They want us to disappear, to whittle and carve ourselves for a

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place in the world.

“Women think with their whole bodies and they see things as a whole more than men do.” -Dorothy Day

I consider each body part separately. Are my calves too round? My thighs too big? Do my arms look too masculine, are my breasts too slight? Are my shoulders too wide, my stomach too loose? There is no sum to these parts. I dismantle myself in the shower where I cannot avoid my exposed body. Considering my ragged toenails, torn by my anxious fingers, measuring the swell of my waist with shaking, wide palms. I drip in the tub long after the water is off, avoiding the lumbering reflection in the mirror.

It has been twenty-one years of living inside of this female body. For eight of those years I have systematically and at times, sloppily, tried to reduce, remove, reject it. Jutting fingers down my throat, hot stomach acid and half-chewed meals, long aimless runs in the dark, pretending to eat while stirring enticing/repulsing food on my plate.

No thank you, I am not hungry. I ate earlier. I already ate. I didn't eat at all.

Bile against my teeth, razor blades on my skin. I do not look like the magazines, television shows, runways.

For none of those years did my body feel like my own.

Now, my body does not feel like my own.

I see women on television, magazine covers, the Internet. Their bodies. Meticulously crafted, embellished with tailored clothing, painted nails, makeup to look natural even though no one looks like that naturally. Even still, they play the housewife, the mom of four, the modest assistant. The bags beneath their eyes have been concealed, their eyelashes extended. We do not see the: stretch marks on their legs, folds of their stomachs, slope of their uneven breasts. Those things do not exist in: the movies, the magazines, the music, the *literature*.

“Be not ashamed women. . . You are the gates of the body, and you are the gates of the soul.” -Walt Whitman

They write about us. They sing about us. They talk about us on the

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record, off the record, when they don't know they are being recorded, when they don't care they are being recorded. Their paintbrushes are saturated with the sexual longing and emotional indifference for us when they paint our bodies. They give us passive, inviting expressions.

I am not a gate, a bird, a rolling mountain, a thing to be desired, pursued, neglected. I do not exist for their consumption, loving hands, violent fists, for them to write about, dream about, fantasize over.

My thighs are perhaps a little too big and breasts noticeably uneven. As is such. I eat half as much as I should and forget who I am when I am dragging my soles on the treadmill. Glance at the other feminine bodies. I see their twin thoughts in their slightly creased mouths: dissatisfied, disembodied, driven. When I hear, watch, read a man compare a woman to an idea, an unhinged concept, an animal, a place in nature, I turn them off, trash the book, walk away.

I am not here for memorable quotes, romantic thoughts, how women are this, women are that. How our feminine bodies drive men wild, to suffering, despair, to creativity. I don't care, it is irrelevant, sickening, annoying at best. They do not own a feminine body, they do not understand. They can never have us, through their stilted similes and forgettable metaphors. And they never will.