

Unprecedented Body

by Julia Rudlaff

**Signs You Have (or Had) COVID According to Dr. Fauci
(Featured on Eat This, Not That!))¹**

- 1. Fever**
- 2. Cough**
- 3. Fatigue**
- 4. Anorexia**
- 5. Shortness of Breath**
- 6. Muscle Aches**

I'm sitting in the bathtub,
lavender epsom salt soaking
deep breathing
soothing, calming attempt
to fall asleep tonight

I'm not starving
just pretending
not to notice

It started
when my mom asked
how I'd lost so much

weight

this semester

I call it
indifference

or
maybe
thinking back to the
flashing words of online
nutrition gurus

it's just covid

my anorexia returning
now dressed as a symptom,
a side effect

like
online classes
work from home

wear a mask
(relapse)

The article said
40-84% of people
with covid
experienced
loss of appetite

which,
according
to the people
who preach the difference
between a strawberry banana
and peanut butter banana
smoothie at jamba juice,

is the very same
thing as anorexia

Dear Eat This, Not That!,

let me tell you something
about
anorexia

technically,
anorexia is
the fear of gaining weight

but
off the record—
from the journal entries,
anorexia is:

loss of
interest
energy
relationships
joy
voice
focus
sleep
bladder control
resilience
bone density

spirit

emotion

life

appetite

so please,

Eat This:

Loss of appetite

NOT:

Anorexia

When the internet finds out Covid-19 can make you lose weight

In April 2020,
at the beginning of the pandemic-fueled,
generational tik tok craze,
there was a trend

back then,
covid-19 and death were rarely said in the same sentence,
but “coronavirus” and “skinny” became a soundbite
teens on tik tok lined up
waiting to get pricked by spike protein fingers
and turn into a skinny princess

videos of kids
licking door handles,
treadmill arms, and sticky gym floors
circulated the “for you” pages,
everyone was risking their lungs
to display their ribs
this shortcut to weight loss was deemed
worth the risk
and to many,
hilarious

maybe no one got sick,
maybe no one died from this,
but we saw it,
a society weighing the pros and cons
of catching a virus now
tied to the death of
millions

when I was 10,
I remember hearing the phrase
nothing tastes as good as skinny feels
and I wonder now,
if that also applies to oxygen

In May,

When I see the skeleton
of a deer
or fox
decorating
the forest floor

I remember

how I used to
how I sometimes still
wish
that body
was mine

I hesitate –
calling it a
Body
what makes a
body
more than
bones?

Is it

blood,
meat,
a conscience?

who knows

I know,
it's been a long winter.

I see myself
emerge
becoming more
bone
than

blood

I remember

falling

decaying in february

refreezing in april

I wonder,

when the snow melts from my veins
if the rivers within me
will continue to run
or –

if i'll wake up
carved apart,
pelvis under piles of leaves
skull propped up on a tree
spine dangling,
turned into jewelry
for an artist's
neck

Dangerous Alone

I left the candle
burning
in the kitchen

I am afraid
if I blow it out
I will disappear
along with
the flame

its light
the only thing
distinguishing me
from darkness

it is in the
flicker of heat
that I see myself

flame

I pretend to
believe my fire
will never
extinguish

I live
under the pretense
of oxygen
always being there
to feed me

I forget
that sometimes
I am not
hungry

What became of my body

My ribs
learned to eat
emptiness
off the bone
in a sauce
of solitude and call it
satisfying

My hips
began meeting
the backs of chairs
with electric
shock

My spine
practiced wringing itself
dry
after swimming laps
through unprecedented
times

My cheeks
swallowed themselves
in trying to tell stories
over the phone

My hands
froze
in a perpetual
grip on my sole
source of
connection

My stomach
churned worry
into shelf-stable
worry
flavored with possibilities
of death,
and realities
of future

My teeth
decayed from

chewing on all my
thoughts

My body,

my Body,
became
a time capsule,
every organ an
artifact, every
limb a coded
message, every bone
a reminder
of who I chose not
to become

What Makes a Ballerina Body? ²

Weight

Breaks
the seamless
sculptural
Quality

Bulges

Interfere
with continuous
Reach,

Bulk

Prevents
a harmonious
Outline

Change

takes
Time,
commitment to care
beyond the Line

The Aesthetic

is practical,
Costumes
are Expensive

Directors

prefer
a tiny head
atop
a short torso
atop
long legs,

Build

a Balanchine
body
with your
limbs

Fit

into
someone else's

Costume

Lose
the five, six
pandemic pounds

Look
like a dancer

after all,

The body
is
the art

Diet Companies See Gains as Americans Try to Drop Pandemic Pounds ³

Business

is boom boom booming
for diet companies like Noom
who watch as people Zoom
practicing their pretty half-smiles
and picture-perfect posture
waiting for the day we all
go back out
put on our pre-pandemic pants and
face the world
in three dimensions

We keep consume, consume,
consuming the media,
the media keeps telling (selling) stories
of diet companies,
amplifying the voices of those who
profit off prejudice so deep
we'll pay to make it disappear,
slip it off like an edamame shell,
sure
we'll subscribe, we'll buy,
we'll try
anything

We will never see,
believe, or dream ourselves
good enough
until we purchase the subscription,
the meal-in-a-box, the
diet not Diet shakes
all carefully curated to feed us less
so we believe ourselves less
so we keep clicking yes
yes, yes I'll buy,
yes, I'll subscribe
yes I'll do it to survive—

After all,
who doesn't want to, need to,
lose the pandemic pounds fast?

At Home,

I live in picture frames,
eat prom photos for breakfast,
walk through exhibits of a life
I can't remember

high school
like blackout poetry,
sharpie marks over mannequin bodies
always covering up the rest of the story

at home,
half-cooked memories
seep into my brain like asbestos
my ghost town mind was fully excavated
but home
is where the landfill lives

when I walk through the front door,
my identity sheds itself like snakeskin
my selfhood erodes from a fragile cliffside and
I peel away layer upon layer of growth
until I am the smallest Russian nesting doll
of myself

at home,
I watch as I regress in the mirror
face like a ventriloquist
trying to say
I can leave now
without moving my lips

but here,
there will always be a hand in my back
a ripple in my spine
I don't need to speak
to hear her voice in my throat

I pretend
this place is meaningless,
absent of memory,
just a green screen I grew up in front of
but,
my name is carved into the grout between tiles,
the clothes I grew into, out of, and around

hang stoically in the closet and
jewelry from every birthday rusts in the mirror cabinet–

but
through the front door,
outside this science class diorama of memory and trauma
I begin to recognize the shadow
behind me

in the driveway,
I start growing back
limb by limb,
leaf by leaf, name by
name until I am
again full of sunlight,
warmed by the many layers of
myself

I become,
after the last turn
out, the person I
always wanted to be
when I grew up–

I live in my own body,
eat pasta for dinner,
and walk through life
in my favorite clothes

freedom like music,
singing my own
anthem
on the drive away
from memory
lane

Gender-Body Helix

Body dysmorphia
Gender dysphoria
Body Gender dys
phoria morphia Gender
dysmorphia dysphoria
Body

*I want to start working out
again
To look more masculine,
more chiseled*

I know it's not good
for me

but

I want that muscle back,
the one in my shoulder that used to bulge
in headstands during yoga,
the divided calves that in the right light,
with the right shoes, might belong to someone
named Jake or Will

I want that body
back
the one I could shape and mold all day
until it slid into any costume like
it was custom made

would it kill me?

maybe

In a perpetual game of
Russian roulette with my body
it's hard to determine which trigger,
which chamber, holds the real bullet

maybe it was staying at home,
living between walls decorated with almost caskets,
maybe it was the men's shoes,
showing me who I could dress up as
maybe it was the extra time, extra uncertainty,

extra absence that sent me spiraling
into control

I may never know
the genesis of my body
issues, the cause of relapse,
I may never unravel the strands of
body dysmorphia and gender dysphoria
they are borne from inheritance and circumstance,
bound by the idea that I will never look
quite right

Performance

Every day
we dress up as someone,
slip into a Victoria's Secret body
project Calvin Klein's confidence
paint on a Sephora mask

It's as habitual as breathing –
the act of putting on clothes,
creating our persona for the day

In the morning,
getting dressed and
looking at myself in the mirror
is like looking at a cloud and
trying to determine if it's
a bird, a swordfish, or
a horseshoe crab –
my existence always felt
up for interpretation

But now,
with no one here to perceive me,
I decide to walk around undetermined
a colossal mystery
to myself
and the walls that enclose me

Days of Self Discovery

The couch was our chrysalis
tik tok the enzyme
that turned body
cells into imaginal cells,
allowed to grow into
anything

in those months
we digested ourselves,

lived in stages of viscosity

information become the agar
thickening strands of
identity proteins
daring to show us
who we could become

algorithms can be suggestive

and I can't say we will all emerge
butterfly or moth,

in fact,
most of us will live here,
suspended in a soup of our own
disbelief,
bathing in the shock
of seeing,
for the first time reflected,
what's been eating away
at us

all this time

Euphoria

“I can describe it like—”

A weight being lifted

Undoing the suppression of emotions

A locked door opening

Contentment

*A surprise birthday party
you sort of knew about*

*Something intangible,
currently unknown,
not yet fully experienced*

*Looking in the mirror and seeing
myself*

*Feeling right
Feeling present
Feeling like I finally fit*

in my body

Articles Referenced:

1. “Signs You Have (or Had) Covid, According to Dr. Fauci” – Eat This, Not That!
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2. “What is a Ballet Body?” – New York Times
(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/03/arts/dance/what-is-a-ballet-body.html>)
3. “Diet Companies See Gains as Americans Try to Drop Pandemic Pounds” – New York Times
(<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/11/business/covid-weight-loss-companies.html>)