

GROTESQUE:  
An Illustrated Essay

**Abstract** I stapled my finger to your Valentine. Teacher marched me down the long corridor to Nurse's office by the elbow, made me hold my arm at length. Thick paper dangled from the tip, pink heart soaking red. I bent my arm and ripped the staple out. Gave you the card in spite of the blood. Or because of it.

I.

**Preliminary Remarks on the Organization of Animals**

**Figure 1.1** Cut off the toe to save the foot. Cut off the foot to save the leg, below the knee, above the knee. Excise the skin to stop the spread. Resect the organ to save the organ. Remove the organ to save the lymph. Kill the lymph to kill the cells. Suppress, poison, cauterize, amputate, decimate, burn, ravage.

**Figure 1.2** It is the wrong sweater. The neck is edged in blue ruffles, fabric that gives me hives. She knows I don't like plunging necklines, layers on top of breasts. Well just buy something *you* like then, she says over the phone.

You have a gift receipt? the sales girl asks. I nod. The sweater is folded into a tight square. Red welts are beginning to rise up on my palms, but I do not let it go, even as the girl attempts to hand me a credit slip. She flicks the paper against the counter insistently. She is looking at me funny. I drop the sweater and take my receipt.

Alone in the car, I pull the hood of my winter coat over my face and sob into the steering wheel.

### Figure 1.3

I say: *You can't live without it, Mom?* But that isn't what she means.

You're not sure you can live without it.

You're not sure you want to live without it.

You don't want to live without it.

You do not.

You do not want.

You do not want to live  
if

**Figure 1.4** My mother does not behave as I do in crisis.

**Figure 1.5** What are you willing to endure? **Figure 1.6** Please answer the following questions: How many millimeters? What range of motion? What level of care? What can you live without? Can you learn to walk with a prosthetic? Can you tie your shoes with one hand? Can you operate a motorized chair with your own breath? Can you cath yourself? Can you change your own colostomy bag? Can you watch your hair collect in the drain? Can you forfeit your ability to have children? Can you inject yourself daily? Can you become accustomed to pain?

**Figure 1.7** Suddenly, I win the lottery: tens of millions of dollars. I swoop down and present my mother with an incredible check. Her house is paid for, and all her bills. We eat at the best restaurants and make plans to travel extensively. We pay off our relatives' debts and send their children to college. She wants for nothing. Has access to the best possible doctors and the luxury of time and resources for her recovery.

We are insulated by money. Everything is perfect.

But it begins to grow back. Having the means to fight doesn't guarantee success. What she wants is to never have had it in the first place. Our relatives criticize us for not giving enough. Every child we put through college feels entitled to more. We travel to remote

places; we escape. She drags one toe through the sand, nothing left to read. I bounce a tennis ball off the wall of a Polynesian hotel room. There are no good doctors. A return is inevitable. We go back to our respective homes and wait to see if she'll die. Good news only feels like a precursor to bad. I become consumed by small tasks: a grocery list, daily showers, trip to the post office, broken taillight and oil change, new television show, weekend in the mountains, cleaning out the hall closet, a plate of broccoli scraped into the trash. I mean to buy lottery tickets but never do.

## II. Structure of the Human Body

**Figure 2.1** A functioning brain means quality of life. Means you're an inspiration. Means your own segment on the *Today* show. Means a smile-plastered caregiver in the background. Do not question this.

If the body functions but the brain does not, it is a shame. It is a total loss. It is a perfect candidate for euthanasia.

If the brain functions but the body does not: She is a miracle.

**Figure 2.2** I run until I **Figure 2.3** in the bushes. Hands on my

stomach, probe my waist, feel where curves ebb. I want to get hard.  
Concrete trunk. Erect abdomen. Solid mass. A tailor's dummy.

### Figure 2.4

because I didn't imagine it this way.  
because I need.  
because everything will be different.  
because I should have babies first.  
because I'll be an orphan.  
because I couldn't stand it.  
because I

**Figure 2.5** Microdermabrasion (noun): surgical removal of skin imperfections, especially wrinkles, by means of a vacuum containing mineral crystals; an outpatient procedure; a procedure performed at a salon or spa; an Eastern European woman who swabs the face with alcohol to dry it out, who says "*close eyes an make leaps do dees;*" a high-pitched whining, mechanical growl slip; a scraping, pulling taut, the device like a pen or wand or an electric toothbrush; soothing wet cloths, the triumphant production of a plastic container full of dead white skin.

Aftercare instructions are explicit: I am not allowed to touch it for

several days unless I have thoroughly washed my hands and, even then, only to apply a thick vitamin serum. I pat my face gently when it itches. My skin, raw and fresh.

I convalesce.

My husband offers me things, takes care around the house. I cannot sit on the porch with him. The sun, and the wind, too: I cannot risk exposure. I place the rocking chair near the window so that light can only reach my waist. Lap blanket and book in hand, I swan my neck, eyes closed and very still.

### III. Physiological Remarks

**Figure 3.1** Everyone is having a fucking baby. Everyone, everywhere, is fucking pregnant. All of our friends. Everyone I went to school with. Women in the park. On the sidewalk. Deciding what to order at the sandwich counter. I pretend to be happy for people as they use up all the baby names. I'll either be the stoic childless aunt who gets wistful at everything a goddamned baby does, or have one and be a sad orphan idiot mother.

**Figure 3.2** Wake up. Remove top and inspect body in the mirror facing the bed. Fasten bra, pull on socks, sweatshirt, and smooth hair. Bathroom. Kitchen. Full glass of water and prescription antacid pill. Wait one half-hour before eating. Breakfast is one egg, one plain piece of toast, one multivitamin, one naproxen sodium tablet, three cups of coffee. Wait two hours before running. Trail is a fifteen-minute walk from the house. Cross street, enter park. Music on. Enable program that records distance, time, speed, and calories. Run the full length of the trail, through side cramps, frigid or thirsty, no slacking. Do not complain. Do not disrupt the data. Do not think about a sack full of squishy organs held in suspension by sinewy bits of flesh inside an abdomen, how they jostle apart with each hard step, then realign.

**Figure 3.3** Most people don't know what to say when I tell them. Others respond by saying how hard it was for them when their mother passed away. But she's not dead yet she's not dead yet she's not dead yet she's not dead yet she's not she's not dead yet she's not dead yet she's not dead yet she's not she's

**Figure 3.4** Peregrine Laziosi was a wealthy young man in medieval Italy who hated the Church, gathered up a band of rabble-rousers, and assaulted St. Philip as he preached to the faithful in the square. Peregrine slapped St. Philip in front of everybody, but St. Philip

simply offered him the other cheek. Humbled by forgiveness, Peregrine became a monk. He decided that the best way to show his loyalty to God was to stand whenever it was normal to stand, and also stand whenever it was normal to sit. He stood for thirty years. All that standing gave him rotten leg cancer. The night before amputation, Brother Peregrine dragged himself to a crucifix and prayed to God for a little while, then fell asleep. By morning his leg was healed, and St. Peregrine became the patron saint of cancer patients. **Figure 3.5** What I'm trying to say is

#### IV. Medical Practice or Treatment of Internal Diseases

**Figure 4.1** I forgot and paid the phone bill late. I used you as an excuse. The operator forgave the charges. If you die now I will never forgive myself.

**Conclusion** Last trip home, I stole cigarettes every night after you went to bed. I sneaked around like high school. We had oysters for dinner three times. Narragansett Ale and cornbread. Bottles of prosecco and expensive cheeses. We named the Christmas tree 'Alphonse' and strung lights around the porch. The weather broke, rainy and warm. On my last night we got drunk. I smoked right in

front of you, but for once you didn't scold me or lecture. We linked arms, laughing, while cultures grew in a lab downtown.