

LAUREN W. WESTERFIELD

Cramping at the Bone

You¹ tell me [now, outside the bar, tonight, as we are leaning each against the roughened brick, as you are smoking and I run my tongue along my drying lips] this thing about the subject of the sentence. As in, my sentences keep lacking them. This thing: *the subject* [lacking].

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At this, my body slips. Slides a little down and sideways, wondering. I tilt my eyes; my head. Yours are steady, but your fingers and the orange, burning endpoint of your Camel menthol quiver in the windless, moon-blue dark. That is: your body, likewise, slips. This is natural. This is how a body works. A body sprawls, multiple in all its makings and unmakings. But what I want to know is what's left over [under?]: what, within a body, *holds*? Not the legs or fingers, or the kind of hair like mine that scatters,² wind-swept, any volume an artifice [powders, brushing, barrel irons]—not, that is, the hair itself. Unpacked, it all falls flat. Even bone, because a bone can thin and hollow.

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I don't know how to tell you what I mean. I bum a drag, instead.

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1. Perhaps a single person. Perhaps several. Perhaps, at times, myself—or even you. Or even language, how it slips. Let these options coexist; let them multiply and blur.

2. Extremities do not hold and press, insist on weight, the way the center of a body does. If I want to hold you, I could try to use my lips, my hands; but if I wanted to make sure you stayed, I would need more force. Lay my body down against you.

The word *subject* comes from the Latin *subjectus*—meaning, “brought under.” A line break, or an indent, or a footnote, leaps and pushes language underneath. But what about *brought*—that is, the bringing: two hands carrying or pulling, moving meaning laterally from one place to another? The difference has to do with carriage as opposed to energy and text that presses as it piles. Either way, I end up focused on accumulation; weight. What I feel within the confines of a tighter space: tiny, urgent shifts within the cracks, between the brick. But does it follow, then, that breakage *brings*? Does it *carry*? I don’t know. I don’t think so, necessarily. What’s true is that a breakage is overt—that it calls out, draws attention with each reaching arm.

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For the sake of this, right now, tonight—the moon, the brick, the hint of menthol on my tongue, the way it lingers, how you let your cigarette just rest and stick along your lazy upper lip, how it makes me want to kiss you—let’s imagine you and I are lovers. Let’s imagine, at the very least, we *were*.

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The notion of the subject lends itself to much confusion. Consider: SUBJECT:³ as brought under, thrown beneath; as the primary figure under scrutiny or discussion; as the grammatical element around which the rest of a clause is predicated, or the central part of a proposition; as a leading theme or motif, or a branch of knowledge; as subordinate; as the conscious mind or ego, especially as opposed to anything external to the mind—that is, the central substance of a thing as opposed to its attributes; the thing inside the [body] thing itself, that which MAKES that thing a “self”;⁴ as dependent or conditional upon, or under the authority/thumb of [____]; to cause or force to undergo; to bring—a country, or a person, or a notion, language, text—under control. Consider my subjective role; my authority as the

3. Oxford English Dictionary.

4. This particular definition seems as if it might—or should—resolve the matter. But, as you can see, the definitions continue; they sprawl.

digester of established codes, as borrower of language, definition [sometimes copying verbatim from the purported facts of language—what a word *does*, indubitably, *mean*—and sometimes skewing my translation just a little bit, making cuts, adding a word, subtracting several, embracing the non-historic, non-factual, hole-ridden, angular refraction of the facts].

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And maybe let's imagine I am writing you a letter. Let's imagine you are not right here, standing in the cooling night beside me [reaching; ache; this micro-distance in between our bodies, how it reaches, grows inside my chest the more I wait and stand and look at you, your lips, your steady gaze—]

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Or perhaps I started out to write a poem. To find the inside stuff beneath the surface, packed and filling up the middle of the thing. Perhaps I started out determined: *stay right here*. Feel into this box, its tightness, short and quickened breath. As if I were an airplane passenger en route to L.A. from New York, stuck with nothing but this body and these hands for hours—five or six—it has been years since I have made this kind of trip, and now in fact I realize I have *never* flown from L.A. to New York, that I am writing fiction, or perhaps a poem after all because a poem never promised to be true—and how a box of language, when one can't climb out, or punch a hole somewhere, or verge into a corner, might in fact force one to stretch the way I stretched the first time I took yoga in my freshman year of college, vowed to fold in half each day and night and day until my fingers reached beyond the stiffness of my hamstrings, glutes, and calves down to my toes; that is, turned my too-long, scattered body and its separateness into a single circuit—closed.

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Then again, perhaps what I mean to say is less about my love for you—less about this "you" and "me," less about these bricks and lips and summer nights—and rather something vague and bothersome about the sentence. How a sentence moves. Its processes and turns. About my love

affair with sentences [or you]. About the infidelity of lines. About the urge I've felt, so often in the summertime, to break—

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—or else, more recently, to stay: remain inside. Like sentences, the urges also turn. Sometimes with the weather. The colder brittle leaves appear, swirling and cracking on the pavement, the more I want to stay inside. I will admit to loving gray: especially the mornings, how they stretch sometimes into the night. How sometimes, all day long is purple-gray and white, and brittle leaves until the sunset comes: a burst of shouting pink and gold against the backdrop of the end. There are days when sun without the privacy of warmth—the silent melt of lying on the carpet in a pool of it, or lying *by* a pool [with almost-silent chlorinated blue, without the screams of children or the eyes of men] is more like an assault. Sunlight is a gaze. Sunlight *insists*; subjects my body to its blazing. My instinct is to battle this. With gray, I can remain inside or outside as I choose, my body free to spread under thick sweaters, blending in, unnoticed as it moves, held and loose at once against my black-white-box-check coat, against a sea of black-coat bodies, boxed and walking fast with short, black steps.

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Now you will say *this is not a poem*. This is a wandering. An attempt. It is an essay, or at least pieces of one. Except that I am trying [as much as I can] not to break this subject into pieces. I am trying to stay put. It may not seem like it—despite the ruse of form—because this volume, this solidity, is artifice. With time and wear, it thins. It breaks. You can see it very easily—you have only to look down. I can see it, too. Like I said: artifice. But it is also something like necessity. It is difficult to be inside the body. I do not like it here, unless I am succumbing to the circuitry—the looping energy—of breathless run-ons. I like to fall down into language, but my body does not like to fall and that is why I do not ski or roller blade or ride a bike. I like to think I know the difference. Then again, who's to say each block of text, so long as it propels and turns, is not also a poem? Is not also a fiction, or the truth?

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The bone of my left-upper canine is recessed. Thinning out, like glass. If I could make my body small and crawl inside the hollow of my mouth, examine where the twist and curl of speech is coming from [behind the teeth, behind the tongue], I might get close enough to see something of gum and cheek—to peer behind the thinning bone, the pink of flesh—towards the root. Root is *nerve*; is *brain* [yet even synapse, fiber, nerve—all of it is still the body]. Would I sacrifice the solidness of bone in order to see past all this—to see inside my mind, crawl further still, grow smaller, shrink and grind my body down—reduce the definition of a body to its smallest point? Would this smallness, in its distillation, be a thing that *holds*?

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I am a serial writer and re-writer of lists. If this is artifice, it is also not a secret. My days, then, become these structured texts: one after another. Structure gives me comfort. You know this all too well. So then, if I'm trying to push boundaries, what is the opposite? Is the answer dreams? If I am the subject of the dream, what is the dream itself? In the dream, I am at once author and subordinate. In the dream, I am thrown beneath my mind and day and drowsiness. The dream is not my text, *per se*. But it is also solely mine, without external author, without any translation offered or available beyond that which I might attempt [or eschew]. Inside the inside of my mind: that is where a dream is written. The dreams: they turn like sentences. They take different forms. The dreams unpack themselves within a box of sleep. It is a large box. Some nights, it fills. The dreams: they sprawl, multiplicitous in my unmaking. The body [mine] can't get out from under them. The mind is curled and caught beneath their weight and bend—that is, brought under. If I am thus the subject of my dream, what is the dream itself? A breakage? Slipping skin? A paradox? A kind of gray?

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Let's imagine you are absent. That even as you stand here, close to me, I [already?] miss you. Want to tell you what it is I love [about your lips and hands and eyes—sea glass, ever steady up above the curling smoke]. What I love is

how you tell me things about myself without insisting that you *know*—who I am entirely, that is, or who I ought to be. The way you offer me myself as subject—not to be *brought under* [you], but to remind me that I have two hands and many shovels and am very capable of digging. Like me, you are a close reader. You observe the tension that creeps up between the cracking bricks. You catch my tics—like when I look down and to the right instead of making eye contact.⁵ You smile in a very certain way when my head tilts, when my mind strays: from this [the night, the blare of streetlamps]. You say: *you are such an essayist*. You catch me in my multiplicities. You take away my footnotes, all my scattered narratives. You do not put me in a box. Instead, you hand it to me: put the box between my cold red hands. What I hear you say—what I want to hear, and so I do—is this: *HERE. MAKE. STAY UNTIL IT LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING TRUE.*

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Perhaps this is what it means: *to fall*. If I fall asleep, and in my sleep I write the text of dreams, and then I wake and write as straight and bare as I can stand to write, write to catch each image, movement, my sole subjective move the faultiness of memory . . . well, what is the difference? What, in fact, do I know? Perhaps what I like to think, and what I think, and what I *know* [that is, possess, hold, like an object in my palm, like the inside of the inside of myself, like the text between these brackets, or your hands, your love that I have slipped and fallen hard beneath]—perhaps all of these are separate things, indeed. Disparate, even as they overlap.

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I am trying to make sense of our affair. My attraction has to do with how you seem to care less about the answer than the push—than me, moving [under?].⁶ Even if that means I move farther from you. Or further inside myself. Even if it means pressing my body down—hands reaching, gripping,

5. This is absolutely true. You have even seen me do it. In person, even on the page [that is, indent?]

6. Almost as if you were an essay—an attempt—

torso curled in half to close the circuit—rather than my body flung against yours in the dark. And even as I squirm and want to branch off into other stories, linkages, even as I twist and crack my neck against the confines of the sitting, making, digging [more into the core of something hidden, something seeded, than beneath the ground or underneath my nails, my skin, sprawling like an itch], I am in love with you. How you make me want to see myself this way—alone, and still.

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If imagining your absence frightens me—even now, tonight, even as I feel it coming, feel this distance growing—it also, somehow, soothes. Knowingness and absence may go hand in hand. That is, knowing isn't possible; but knowing is not the locus of agency. The seed of knowing might become a thing, a text, which, through language, I can give you—put into your hands [or mine] to hold. But it is also irreducible to any single point [body—seed—truth—self]. In this, our multiplicities will always be eluding one another. This is absolutely true. Absence is true. All these angles for it—ways of breaking, digging, at the thing itself, fully worked out, and the main room at the center, until what's left is many smaller rooms, each a different doorway to ambivalence.⁷ To cracks and open spaces. Gaps for ghosts. For dreams. Incomprehension and suggestion. You might say: *choose the room that trips you—interrupts your sense of knowing anything at all. Lose control. Let the room, the cage, the risk and its uncertainties, arrest you.*⁸

7. After Anne Carson.

8 The original—body, story, lover, myth, yourself, myself—does exist. It is in the center. But you are not. I am not. We are underneath. The original is X. We cannot solve for X. And so, instead, we say: HERE. STAY. MAKE. YOU MUST RENAME IT.