

Sydney Boyum

“Is it here?” She asked, touching my chest.

I moved her hand slightly lower.

“There, yeah.”

“Mine is here,” she told me, touching the bottom of her throat. I don’t know why hers looked like a golf ball resting above her sternum, or why mine felt like a red gnawing in between my two lungs, but she had asked me where I felt anxiety in my body, and I knew that was where mine got caught.

A tension I had become aware of this summer on a phone call with a psychic. After she told me I was grieving something I could not figure out at the time, she said I held stress in my body. The statement seemed vague. She’s probably right, I thought, but any person could have come up with that.

Then she asked about my chest. Was I feeling something there?

No, I said instinctively. Wait, actually, yes. I hadn’t felt particularly anxious that day and many things in my life had smoothed out their wrinkles, but moments of doubt and fear would still linger. Just because today was a good day didn’t mean the knot that’d been building just magically dissolved.

I remember a night that prior February in which an anxiety manifested itself so aggressively and physically that I became convinced my room was haunted. I even considered the possibility that my ex-girlfriend had hexed me.

“Honestly my body feels weird as fuck”, I texted a friend at 11:31 PM.

“I feel like I’m randomly dissociating for seconds”, “I feel grounded emotionally but my body feels anxious” I relayed to her.

I texted my mom similar notions, just minutes later: “It feels like someone is trying to put a spell on me” , it “just feels like my body is energetically affected in a way that my brain isn’t”—“like it’s not lining up”.

“But you are not scared? Right?” she asked.

“No, just confused.”

Even though I told multiple people and even wrote in my journal that I didn’t feel anxious, some part of me clearly was. I was convinced that because there was nothing in my brain that I was actively running through, it must’ve been some external force. A hex, a ghost, or an illness coming on.

“I just don’t understand”; “this isn’t something that happens to me” I repeated to my mom. I thought that it was different from the times I’d peeled away from myself in high school because so much else had changed.

I was looking at myself more softly than ever, feeling less codependent than I had in a long time, and regrouping myself much more consistently. But looking at myself more softly than before was still harsh enough to rough the skin, and better doesn’t guarantee good.

My positive attitude was sweet, and also extremely naive. These shifts happen slower than sap.

Trying to be present after such a devoted effort not to is like gently tugging at a mountain.

But I think I’m getting better at getting better.

This past New Year’s Eve my friend Evie and I sprawled out on her carpet as the clock approached midnight. Each of us lay flat on our stomachs with our journals in hand.

The night was more slow and still than I think either of us expected. With half of our friends away or out with omicron, her departure to school and my wisdom tooth surgery on the approach, a more careful New Year’s Eve revealed itself.

But we were happy to spend the night together, listening to music without words, pulling out sweet pieces of each other.

We leaned into the quiet of the night and decided to ditch resolutions and journal our gratifications of the year.

I made sure to name everyone I loved, my good health and my safety. And the first thing I wrote after was “my newfound comfort in my body.”

I let the rest of the list flow.

“the warmth of other bodies, closeness, vulnerability, luck, green leaves, trees, crisp cold air, spring sweat... My clothes falling off my body so perfectly... new friends everywhere, my face, my eyes, new cheek and sideburn stubble... my journals... wonderful memories that get tied to places and things, deep breaths... my chest, my arms, my hands... The little

dipper... smells and moments that take me outside of myself, what a good song can do, signs and synchronicities”, “feeling alive in my body”.

“Moments when I am truly present.”, “dancing in a big hoodie with my pants slipping, stillness”, “Having my body feel so true.”

Evie and I shared back some of our favorites and found we had overlap in “kissing” and “dancing.”

But my improvement in self image and the way it spun out was unique to me. Even though she was not experiencing the same moment as me, Evie listened intently and lovingly. It was almost as if I was finally seeing myself through her eyes.

When she met me at age fourteen, I was trying to pull away from myself.

I spent much of high school tugging at my clothes, hoping they would drape over me in a way that would successfully hide me. I resented the way I looked, felt to the touch. I didn't want to be present for those experiences.

I wanted to shrink myself into nothing, let my hoodie and pants become massive and everything else tiny. I wanted to unravel myself, tearing bits away, and saying nothing. I desperately hoped someone would notice, dreamt of them finding my suffering humble even though it was anything but. I wanted to be seen without being touched, and more than anything, I wanted to feel loved though I wouldn't dare to say it.

I told myself anger was productive and I deserved to be angry. I told myself maybe if I drove a socket wrench between my ribs everything would feel correct and perfect. I told myself I'd save time if I paid less attention to mirrors. And the resentment and anger only fueled anxiety. They were all obsessed with each other.

The reasons why I felt these ways are best explained in more than a thousand words, but I can tell you that despite their pervasiveness, they eventually did begin to disintegrate with time.

I've been getting better at getting better, I think. My day to day feels so different. It's hard to put into words, but maybe best captured in moments smiling to myself while walking alone and the little joy that creeps up on me in such gentle and unexpected ways.

Or maybe some things are just better explained by those who love you.

A few months ago I stumbled across my name in Evie's journal, looking at a photo of a drawing she did. Poking out in a block of text, there was “SYDNEY” in her all caps handwriting, parallel to the artwork.

I picture myself getting dressed like how Sydney does, or how I imagine he does. These days he looks so himself, it's wonderful to see. I'm not even near him and I still feel it. I want people to feel the comfort shedding and regrowing all over me. Like a fuzzy, fixing sweater.

I was remembering her words the other night after my shower as I looked in the mirror, just observing myself.

How did I get here? I thought, pumping lavender oil into my hand. I smoothed the oil onto my shoulder, back and neck. I always start there. I pumped it into my other hand and rubbed the left shoulder, upper back, and neck, even though I'm pretty sure the oil multiplies the zits on my shoulder blades.

My alternating hands moved across my chest, down my stomach and to my thighs, and eventually to the calves and ankles.

There I was, freshly oiled, completely bare, in front of a full length mirror.

When you look at yourself every day, the person staring back at you becomes less shocking.

When you touch your skin every day, you are reminded of where you are, who you are.

Forced to reckon with the reality of your body—which is almost always less monstrous than whatever the brain has come up with.

I started this routine as an accident. Initially, I was only caring for myself in shallowness. I started taking better care of my skin as a self conscious attempt to clear up acne and dryness. I didn't think much of it, but eventually I expanded to moisturizing the rest of my body too. So at the end of each night, after I'd washed the whole day off, I began to routinely cover myself in this oil, massaging it in gently.

Rubbing it slowly into my skin, making sure it didn't leak onto my sheets or go to waste, I had to be aware of my body. I was met with the tension of wanting to be completely absent in my physical being, and at the same time, somewhere in there, knowing I deserved to feel present and grounded.

In *Meditation at Lagunitas*, Robert Hass says “there are moments when the body is as numinous as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.”

Numinous: having a deeply spiritual or religious quality. Indicating divinity.

It's hard to say what's the oil and what's everything else that it's in flux with. All I know is I'm looking at myself more gently than ever.

There are still moments where that knot in my chest turns into a tight fist. But I no longer have to find five things to see, four to touch, three to hear, two to smell and one to taste.

Now I walk around, smiling to myself, tearing up about how quiet has become so calm. The soft breeze and familiar smells stir up inside of me. I am still, and my body is as numinous as words.

I hope you can feel the comfort shedding and regrowing all over me—like a fuzzy, fixing sweater.