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Bodily Dissociation as a Female Coping
Mechanism in *The Shapeless Unease*,
Ongoingness: The End of a Diary, and *Girlhood*

In a patriarchal society, where the female body is viewed as both dangerous and desirable, women not listening to their bodies has become something of a coping strategy. This is often because bodies tell us something that we cannot or do not want to hear; to listen would be to jeopardize some version of safety, especially if the bodily desire is contradictory to expectations and norms. Each of the female first-person narrators in Samantha Harvey's *The Shapeless Unease*, Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary*, and Melissa Febos' *Girlhood* experiences this tension between the mind and the body as she grapples with her version of safety at stake in her respective narrative. While all three narrators protect a different, personal definition of safety by muting their body's physical realities, they share the instinct to prioritize thinking over feeling in each of their stories. In other words, throughout their narratives, they each wage their own war of mind versus body. This strategy of choosing the psychological over the somatic is a well-honed technique for these narrators: each is a writer and also a professor who has learned to stake her value, both publicly and privately, in her intellect. This professional and cultural dependency on their acumen helps to contextualize the apparent seemingly-reflexivity of the narrators's choice to disassociate from their bodies and to reside instead within their thoughts. All three women have decided to write a kind of self-analysis about their somatic power struggle, which adds a meta quality to their accounts, too.

The three narrators in *Girlhood*, *Ongoingness*, and *The Shapeless Unease* each try to utilize their thinking minds—for the entirety of their lives up until these narratives—as their preferred method for safeguarding

themselves against pain and loss. And for all of these women, bodily dissociation is key to empowering their intellects. They each are avoidant and fearful in their own ways, and they likely fuel their pain with even more avoidant, fearful thoughts.

But when the narrators return to their bodies and face the pain they've tried to rationalize their way out of, each is rewarded with the empowerment and safety they've sought their whole lives. In fact, all three women experience their first and most profound moment of empowerment when they choose their bodies and their pain: Febos's narrator chooses to say no and is safe from the death of her patriarchal safety; Manguso's narrator chooses to forget and is safe from the death of her memory; Harvey's narrator chooses to coexist with her feelings and is safe from the deaths of those she loves. As the narrator in *Girlhood* says herself, "In my fantasies, healing comes like a plane to pull me out of the water. Real healing is the opposite of that. It is an opening. It is dropping down into the lost parts of yourself to reclaim them" (Febos 269).

For Samantha Harvey's narrator in *The Shapeless Unease*, her body is beset with agonizing insomnia. The onset of her sleeplessness coincides with a host of unfortunate and sad events in her life: the separation of her sister and her sister's partner; the death of her neighbor's lodger; a diagnosis of dementia for her father's partner; and a broken leg for her father (Harvey 10). Most impactful is the unexpected and tragic death of her cousin, who serves as a first-hand example of the inevitability of mortality, as "[his] death has invited all deaths" (2). But despite the obvious cry for help for her body—she describes her insomnia as physically painful "as assault"—the narrator turns away from somatic processing of her grief (31). Instead, she is determined to think her way out of her insomnia and thusly, her sadness, either by direct analysis or other intellectualized means:

When I don't sleep I spend the night searching the intricacies of my past, trying to find out where I went wrong, trawling through childhood to see if the genesis of the insomnia is there, trying to

find the exact thought, thing or happening that turned me from a sleeper to a non-sleeper. I try to find a key to release me from it. I try to solve the logic problem that is now my life. (32)

The key would seem to be to attend to her body's grief, but that solution is inaccessible in the immediate, and so Harvey's narrator continues to pursue a solution to her insomnia through this rationalization and bodily dissociation.

The reader bears witness to the narrator's struggle between body and mind throughout the book via her shared inner monologue. Harvey's narrator is a professor at a university, so it comes as no surprise that she would intellectualize her grief rather than experience it directly. She tries to compel herself to "stop thinking, you are always thinking" (88), yet she cannot resist the pull of supposed logic; to feel her emotional pain would be dangerous, as it would threaten her understanding of herself as a woman. Because, as is eventually revealed towards the end of the book, the narrator suffered a miscarriage some years before, and instead of mourning that loss and facing what it meant to her womanhood, the narrator wrote her way out of her body and out of her grief: "Don't want to make and love something that will die. So. Onwards and upwards, get writing, comfort in that, the infinity of words, you're piloting a plane, you can tip the world" (146). If it worked earlier in her life, then of course the narrator would employ the same rationalization and dissociation now when faced with new losses and mortality, even if it means her body suffers.

From therapy and thoughts of religion, to flash fiction, letters, and conversations with friends and strangers, Harvey's narrator continues to try and illuminate the intellectual path to sleep. Inevitably, she also dabbles with potential physical fixes—different medications, new living arrangements, a change in diet—all to no avail because, as she herself notes, "We agree to fight out our thinking lives. In the pursuit of truth, which comes from nothing more than the desire for truth, we fight it out" (107). It is an exhausting fight, but one that still does not elicit sleep, because the narrator still cannot recognize her source of truth: her body.

The Shapeless Unease's narrator experiences an eventual release of the thinking mind and resulting transcendence. It is not prompted by consensual touch or motherhood like the other narrators' return to their bodies. However, it is still a physical experience that creates the conditions for the abandonment of bodily dissociation here: the act of swimming.

While not as directly reflective as Melissa Febos's narrator or as jubilant as the narrator in Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness*, Harvey's narrator is clear when describing her surrender to her physical body, literally calling it the "cure for insomnia" (Harvey 173). She then proceeds to spend the rest of her account—a handful of pages—describing in detail the experience of physically submitting to the force of cold, moving water: "Swim against, against, against...Swim with, with with" (173-74).

This back and forth of the "against" and "with" in the physical body provides respite from the narrator's incessant thoughts. In the "against" motion in the water, one "allow[s] the body of water to assert itself over your own body and to overwhelm the thinking mind, for it is the thinking mind that is so foregone with thought that it forgets there are things in the world which exist thoughtlessly. Be as often submerged in the thoughtless water as possible" (173). And in the "with" motion, another opportunity to leave behind introspection and analysis:

Thus allowing the body of water to assert itself as an upward and downward force, for it is the downward and inward nature of thinking mind that brings on the cursions and iterations of sadness and madness...If a thought should emerge that is overly small or turning inward, head under, drown it. (174)

The battle is no longer the physical (insomnia) with the mental (emotions). I; instead, the narrator has moved to a physical-physical space that she cannot, and will not, think her way out of; it is worth noting here again that acceptance does not equate to succumbing. Just as Manguso's narrator ends her narrative with authority, so does Harvey's, stating for a final time that "[t]his is the cure for insomnia: no things are fixed" (175). In other words, there is no solution to grief or sadness, to or loss or fear, or most

importantly, to death, for this woman. The only way forward, then, is to move through it, to literally swim through and with the feelings.

The first-person speaker in Sarah Manguso's *Ongoingness*, by denying the limitations of her corporeal form, has placed herself in the crosshairs of mind versus body in pursuit of her version of the truth. While she is not in physical pain like the woman in *The Shapeless Unease*, the narrator in *Ongoingness* is no less tormented by the same inevitability of death, epitomized here by the loss of her cognitive brain. In an attempt to halt this demise, she refuses to accept the decay of her memory and catalogs her thoughts in a diary to an obsessive degree, recording every day as a "defense against waking up at the end of my life and realizing I'd missed it. Imagining life without the diary, even one week without it, spurred a panic that I might as well be dead" (Manguso 3). For Manguso's narrator, to lose her memory is to die because as a writer, her mind and its memory are what she values most in the world—and perhaps what her industry values most in her, too.

This is how we meet the narrator of *Ongoingness* on the first page of her account: blatantly fearful in the face of the inevitable, not unlike Harvey's narrator and her fear of death. Both narrators are aware of the impossibility of physical demise, whether it is actual death for Harvey's speaker, or the loss of memory and cognition for Manguso's: "To write a diary is to make a series of choices about what to omit, what to forget" (6). And just as Harvey's narrator persists in her pursuit to ignore the grief and pain in mourning life, so does the narrator here, committing to her daily diary for twenty-five years instead.

What is shared here with the reader is not the diary itself or an analysis of the eight thousand words she recorded, but rather the narrator's reflection on what it means to keep the diary for over two decades. It is a kind of a meta exercise, this narrator's reflecting on the reflections and remembering what it means to her to possibly forget something. Even the form of the book—concise fragments never spanning more than a few lines or a paragraph per page—mirrors what one might expect to see in the

daily log of a life. Through the dozens of years and thousands of words, similarly to Harvey's narrator, Manguso's narrator has successfully utilized thinking instead of feeling in order to deal with the pain and fear of her body up to this point.

For Manguso's narrator, it is the inescapable physical reality of new motherhood that eventually forces her to surrender her fight against forgetting. It is a state of her body that she can no longer ignore or think her way out of or dissociate from. "Then I became a mother," she says, "[and] I began to inhabit time differently. It had something to do with mortality. I kept writing the diary, but my worry about the lost memories began to subside" (Manguso 52). Even the intellectual distance she takes here by not further exploring the concept of mortality exposes a shift in mindset; no longer is the narrator doggedly pursuing all lines of her thought, especially when it comes to the idea of death.

Later in her story, the narrator is more direct in this abandonment of thought. When discussing a chronic illness that started years before becoming a mother, the narrator explains that "...the illness, which still isn't over, wasn't the real problem. Thinking about it was the problem and I don't think about it anymore. Not in the obsessive, all-consuming way I used to" (79). This unavoidable physical state of illness and the shift in perspective it forced prompts the narrator's acknowledgment on the following page that another physical shift—motherhood—has afflicted her with an "impaired memory," and therefore has forced another transformation of her point-of-view.

By the very end of her account, Manguso's narrator is explicit in embracing this loss of thinking and memory. Moreover, she is clear in her recounting to convey that accepting is not the same as succumbing; on the contrary, the narrator actively chooses to forget: "And I'm forgetting everything. My new goal now is to forget it all so that I'm clean for death. Just the vaguest memory of love, of participation in the great unity" (86). She will no longer have the daily record of exactly what happened in a written document, but instead, it will exist in her being. And, she can now acknowledge that she will eventually die along with her memories.

Furthermore, in giving herself to the bodily experience of motherhood and leaving behind her previous dissociation, the narrator transcends her fear of forgetting: “When I remember how this document began, I remember it as something I used to worry about” (87). Manguso’s narrator ends her chronicle with one last nod to form-as-explanation, choosing to conclude her final recorded observation with her son not with a period but instead with an em-dash, thereby conveying the sense of the present physical moment with which she is now concerned.

The narrator of Melissa Febos’s *Girlhood* chooses to ignore her body not because, like the narrators of *Ongoingness* and *The Shapeless Unease*, of a fear of physical death and what it means to grieve that loss. Rather, the narrator here is concerned with the death of safety that is inherent in listening to her body. For her entire life, she has been taught to disassociate from her body so that she may give “empty consent” to the men who want to possess it, and therefore avoid “a worse trauma.” To listen to the “no” of her body would not allow the narrator to “protect [my body] from the violent retaliation of men” (Febos 230). Put another way, her safe existence as she knows it would cease to exist.

Like those of Manguso and Harvey, Febos’s intellectual writer-narrator mutes her body and tunes into her thoughts. This well-developed coping strategy of dissociation is demonstrated at length when the narrator agrees to attend a cuddle party as a test of her consent. Despite a thorough introduction that encourages all participants at the event to withhold their consent to be touched if that is how they feel, the narrator concedes to a request to spoon without assessing first if this is what she wants; the notion of saying no is too foreign to access at that moment.

Once she is in the unwanted cuddle, Febos’s narrator dissociates by freezing out discomfort in her body and occupies her mind instead with non-consequential, distracting thoughts about her surroundings. In three different instances on a single page, she “wonders” about this or that—about her girlfriend; about how long is an appropriate length of time to cuddle; about when the last time the blanket she was under

was washed (206). This strategy of distracted thought is successful enough in its effect of bodily dissociation that the narrator stays in the uncomfortable spooning position for a significant period of time.

The narrator is aware that she deploys this method of freezing out her body because, as she says in a moment of retrospection, “The frozen self doesn’t feel the effect of that self, though it is recorded in the body. The body, it turns out, is an abacus that never forgets, even when our memories do (198). “That self” here is the one who consents to touch she doesn’t want to feel and the narrator knows that eventually, the score of not listening to her body will catch up to her.

In the eighteen months between the narrator’s first cuddle party and her second, she surveys other women and conducts research to try and understand her automatic empty consent. This undertaking is reminiscent of the intellectualization of feeling attempted by Harvey and Manguso’s narrators in their own thought-led battles against forms of death. Only here in *Girlhood*, the narrator is trying to rationalize away her fear of her body and the death of safety-driven consent that it so clearly does not want to give. And similarly to the other two narrators, Febos’s narrator inadvertently moves herself closer to reconciling her body with her mind as she pursues an understanding of the reasons why she dissociates. This recombining is not her nor the other narrators’ intended goal, and it isn’t apparent to any of them that it is transpiring at the moment. But as in any other intellectual pursuit, the more the narrators learn, the less able they are to resist the inevitable truth: they are not separate from their bodies, no matter how much they might think themselves to be.

Manguso’s narrator is forced into this realization and reembodiment through motherhood, while Harvey’s distracts herself into surrendering to her corporeal self by swimming. It isn’t until Febos’s narrator actually attends the second cuddle party and actively chooses to finally fully inhabit her body, as a kind of experiment only, that she is able to process her experiences of empty consent. At that follow-up cuddle party, the narrator commits to listening to her body: “I had consciously given my body an invitation and the space to feel what it really wanted and did not want. My body had turned out to have very strong

feelings” (259). Despite her practiced, intellectual instinct to say yes, the narrator’s body’s response time and time again throughout the course of the second party is “no.”

By finally being in her body and hearing its needs, Febo’s narrator is able to see the root of the fear that drove her empty consent: “I understood, even as it was happening, that the threat I felt [from that man I was saying no to] was a projection. I feared myself, mistrusted my ability to say no. That was why I had come back” (257). With the narrator’s realization that the power resides within herself and not with the men in her life, there is no longer a fear of loss of safety, or therefore, a fear of her body. The need for dissociation disappears and in perhaps the most direct instance of returning to the body of the three women discussed here, Febos’s narrator explicitly addresses her long-attempted vivisection of the mind and body. “My body,” she realizes, “was not the box that held myself, it *was* myself” (259).

Works Cited

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