The Bodies That Remain

EmmyBeber

Published by Punctum Books

EmmyBeber,
The Bodies That Remain.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66812

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2331720
Introduction

Emmy Beber

“To love, bodily.”
Gillian Rose

The Bodies That Remain arrived on its own terms. I spent the next two years gathering examples. Throughout the process people would ask me periodically if I understood the book as a ‘body of work’. It was a collection, so this was a possibility. But somehow this felt too complete. The only physical body I had ever known truly was chaotic, anxious, constantly moving. At the beginning, the book felt like this too; it was unpredictable. The writing within shifted form, changed tone, pace, even subject; as though scattered parts, the texts arrived in my inbox from studios in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago; from hillsides in Yorkshire and the silent landscapes of the French countryside; from London back rooms, Belfast laboratories and even from aboard ship, in the middle of the ocean. It was a peculiar experience coming to care viscerally about the words of others as though it were their bodies I was working with; caring for the bodies being spoken about — the fictions, truths, pain, the sharing of bodies and their absences; learning how to allow a body to appear in writing without becoming the body.
The Bodies That Remain could never become a ‘body of work’ complete because those bodies being written about had written themselves into the future, had shaped the bodies of their readers, their writers and would move beyond. The boundary was too tight. These were bodies whose boundaries remained malleable and even in their absences had refused to expire.

Where ‘body’ as a verb makes material something abstract, The Bodies That Remain, as a collection, became bodily.

How do you reproduce the resistance between the body and its attempt to articulate? To allow the writing to remain uncomfortable performing the inarticulacy of the body — its falters, stutters, spillages — is to attend to the body through language, is to attend to movement; the page changes texture, the words unable to remain still. Or, broken, they lie flat on the page, unmoving.

“If you want to exist, you must accept flesh and the moment.” Jeff Nuttall wrote through the body and his was the first work I grappled with its attention to all things physical. Our language of the body was different but translated it had a shared urgency. When you write the body, you remain within and perform it. Language becomes movement, becomes moment. The urgency I was looking for was interstitial. It was the space between the body physical and the body as it performed itself. How could I turn this into something familiar? Nuttall had devoured all of the body writers before him and I would do the same. I could list the names of some of the writers I worked my way through: Michel Leiris, Roland Bathes, Nathalie Sarraute; Eileen Myles, Hilton Als, Kathy Acker; Susan Sontag, Maggie Nelson, Wayne Koestenbaum; Lynne Tillman, Ben Marcus, Marguerite Duras, and on and on and on.

Each writer could be traced back, each had an entire lineage of other body writers worked through. Though not all directly con-
fronted or involved the body as object within their work, there were residues; language stuttered, remained surprising, moving.

In London I began working with children and realised very quickly that we are taught how to use our bodies. I had to retrain myself to write in a way far removed from my own syncopated scrawl. Their writing understands the body as a thing made by them, able to change its properties. Their surfaces are malleable and those tools that allow them to share their ideas have to be invited in. I thought about Robert Walser’s ever shrinking pencil as I watched a child press pencil into page, how Walser’s writing became smaller and smaller. The children notice everything about their body and yours and are happy to tell you. As a child, my writing was microscopic and remains so to this day. Theirs sits boldly on the line, biting back at the pencil that made them. As a child, before being taught, your body remains out of time.

In a moment of pause, I read Gillian Rose’s *Love’s Work*, Margueritte Duras’s *La douer* and Emily LaBarge’s PhD chapters *The Essay as Form* and thought about the sounds of the body in horror, in mourning, in truth. The body trying to escape itself; Rose describing her want to create an ethnography of shit in the face of seeing her body outside of body, the colostomy bag; the truths or weight of the body as form. The function of the sounds is to make us stop being a body altogether. Yet the body becomes this. Becomes language, becomes writing. As Gillian Rose said, “to love, bodily”. Emotions remains mortal, must remain mortal or else they are nothing.

The most I have learnt about language and the body has been from the writers in this book. It was Philip Hoare telling me about his experience of discovering ambergris in a nook of the ocean and his transferring a small smudge of it from sea to his hand, from his hand to the notebook and the stench that remained. It was talking with Tai Shani about how delicious a
description of flesh might be, how we are shaped by the bodies of others, by the space around them and their movement. It was Lynne Tillman writing Jane Bowles’ disappearance and reappearance, her restlessness in life and successful dispersal at burial, a line drawing of movement across language. It was Mike Harvey’s endless fascination with the meshing and reforming of the body through scabbing and the fierce conversations with Claire Potter on body trauma, how language can show the impoverishment of itself as a performance of bodily experiences made inarticulate. It was reading Mairead Case writing, “When I read and write I know I’m moving somehow. I know my body’s holding space.” The back and forth emails of chlorine soaked lido skin with Heather Phillipson and the stories from Chloé Griffin on the impossibility of the body of water she was sailing over that week, of her new geographies, their sounds and scents and colour. Devouring Harman Bains’ writings, I learnt much on the erotic body in its many guises and curiosities, and I learnt the body as something other — nourishing my own — from the books and essays and stories from Pil and Galia Kollectiv. The ongoing conversation with Kevin Breathnach taught me about the multitude of expressions and odours the body can erupt, the emails with Emily LaBarge about how language can eventually turn on the body, can expose it, and through the sharing of stories and our own experiences with Phoebe Blatton, I learnt what it is to understand how to be within a body. I have stories for every contributor. It has been a privilege to share mind spaces with all of them. Their words have shaped my understanding of writing the body and being a body.

On a car journey recently I had a conversation with my friend who works in palliative care about death. She told me how those that are restless in life, who can never sit still, are often restless at death, they refuse their end. The bodies within this book remain restless and even in their absence find new ways of be-
ing. Molded into the lives of their writers are their bodies, in language. Echoes of the shape of their thinking.