Visceral: Essays on Illness Not as Metaphor
MaiaDolphin-Krute

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Wellness as Metaphor

Many times I have seen written the phrase “illness as metaphor.” I have mostly seen it written like this: *Illness as Metaphor, Illness as Metaphor, Illness as Metaphor*. Because it is, or was, the name of a book, but now, through being written so many times, it is just illness as metaphor.

But illness is a thing that really happens. And aren’t metaphors supposed to be narratives about the only way an unimaginable thing has become possible? Or maybe that’s myth: “finding a hidden plot in a metaphor.”

Since illness is a thing that really happens, how can it be said that illness as metaphor is still the whole myth or still the only narrative through which to imagine a possible unimaginability? Since illness is a thing that really happens, where is the metaphor of opposing belief, the myth that illness never happens as a metaphor or as a real thing? A different or opposite or non-metaphor of illness isn’t the same as a narrative about how illness never happens. To be a perfect myth about the absence of illness, illness can never be mentioned, as a myth or a metaphor or anything else. It must be something else.

It must be wellness.

Wellness feels good. Wellness feels like smoothies and coconut and January all year and whole foods and natural foods and local foods and organic foods. Wellness feels clean. Wellness feels like clean living, like a detox or like a tonic or like an elimination diet or like getting toxins out of your system. Wellness feels anti-inflammatory. Wellness feels so anti-inflammatory it is “cancer-free;” “getting to

the root of all disease”; “anti-aging.” Wellness is good for you. But wellness is delicious and indulgent and decadent and never tastes good for you. Wellness is a practice of living. Wellness is homemade. Wellness is for life.

But: what, exactly, are toxins? This is never clearly defined: I have yet to see in any wellness-related media a list of bacteria or pathogens that accumulate in your body, cause demonstrable harm, and can be removed through things like “tonics.” Especially as tonics can consist of anything from lemon and cayenne pepper in water to raw apple cider vinegar. Or they may even be a juice cleanse, which, again, can be anything from a drink that is more or less fiber to one that is more or less entirely sugar. Whether through a tonic or a juice cleanse, toxins are subject to being flushed out of the body. This is, in fact, already the job of several organs, notably the kidneys, liver, and intestines: human excrement can contain as many as 8 million bacterial cells. This is a design feature of the human body, one utilized with little to no additional support necessary from lemon water. In other cases, “toxins” can also include more deeply embedded or imperceptible substances, like the toxins that are found in or leach into your body through plastic, iPhones, cans, food packaging of any kind, multiple kinds of cookware, water, proximity to industrial or urban sources of pollution, pesticides, fruit or vegetables grown in non-organic conditions, as well as several other sources (all of which cause cancer).

The well body is at a surprising amount of risk for being so healthy.

Wellness, when it feels like January all year, full of commitment and resolutions, as well as during everyday practices of clean living and shorter periods like a detox, is an amount of time. As an amount of time which is assigned as a period during which certain tasks should be accomplished (i.e. “3-day juice cleanse”), wellness is work. But wellness is doing what you love: when periods of time are assigned for the completion of tasks that include the preparation of decadent and indulgent foods that are toxin-free, clean versions of common baked goods (by virtue of being wheat-, dairy-, soy- or egg-free), or the creation of decorative objects made by hand, such as wildflower arrangements or plant hangers (thereby reaping the benefit of increased exposure to oxygen-producing, air-toxin-cleaning plants as well as avoiding toxins in mass produced goods), then
wellness never feels like work. This is further enhanced by the fact that wellness is, above all, a form of consumption. Not only because clean living necessitates the purchase of specialty clean ingredients or products, but also because it necessitates the consumption of wellness-focused media. Wellness requires instruction. As a set of practices that encompasses food, exercise, time management and consumption, wellness is labor as leisure. Wellness is unpaid labor that one does, actually, pay for, but it’s always a fair price: wellness is its own reward.

Wellness is also many objects in and of themselves, mostly as conveyed through images and inspirational merchandising: mason jars, fresh fruit and vegetables in whole pieces or cut decoratively, especially as arranged by color or in an ombre pattern; natural fibers, particularly linen and wool, in muted earth or jewel tone colors; beeswax; bees themselves; wooden spoons; ceramics; handmade ceramics; handmade ceramics in slightly unusable forms but nonetheless filled with decadent clean foods; Edison bulbs; any type of plant; candles; branches; coconuts; gym clothes that do not look like gym clothes; denim; flower arrangements; flower arrangements in mason jars; flower arrangements in repurposed Edison bulbs; bright light and aerial, overhead, shots (so as to better illustrate the body’s/viewer’s position over the objects and therefore the body being in an optimal position to consume); also the Whole Foods bag (paper) printed with “Healthy Looks Good on You;” also the Whole Foods bag (reusable) printed with “Kale Quinoa Chocolate.”

Wellness is a consumer good, and, like other forms of consumption, it is or has become a responsibility. Wellness is just the right thing to do.

Wellness is also much more than this. These are just the objects, images, and vocabulary through which it is communicated. Through these objects, images, and vocabulary wellness has become, if not by this exact name itself, still instantly recognizable as a lifestyle and perspective or rhetoric. Wellness means much more than its objects; it is, of course, a metaphor.

But continuing to examine the social practices through which it is expressed can yield valuable insights. As Susan Sontag writes in *Illness as Metaphor*: “Responses to illnesses associated with sinners and the poor invariably recommended the adoption of middle-class
Money drives the practices of wellness and makes its objects available. And to update Sontag’s observation, written in the 1970s, it is only appropriate that now, in a time of a dissolving middle class, the practices and objects of wellness are not just moderately more expensive than cheaper versions of comparable goods: they are hugely inflated. But wellness as class marker is not purely economic, as Sontag continues: “With a slow motion epidemic, these same precautions take on a life of their own. They become part of social mores, not a practice adopted for a brief period of emergency, then discarded.” Wellness is for life.

When Illness as Metaphor was getting written over and over again and dissolving into illness as metaphor, into a taken-for-granted condition of an unimaginable thing or a thing that never happens—or a thing that only happens “in theory” or in literature—where was wellness? I imagine wellness circling around illness (as metaphor), looking for a way in, through the mass of cancer as uncontrolled growth metaphors or the invisible but difficult to pierce layer of AIDS as alien invasion. But these diseases are not part of the objects, focus, or concern of wellness. Wellness is not a metaphor or a narrative about the kinds of things cancer or AIDS were used to discuss, which changed over time but mainly consisted of fears about industrialization, capitalism, immigration, homosexuality and shifting cultural values. Wellness is not a narrative about any diseases, really; it is protection against them. Wellness is for life. This does not mean that there are not diseases lurking around the edges of wellness (perhaps just as wellness circled illness). These diseases on the fringes of wellness are those (thought to be) caused primarily by exposure to toxins and immersion in unclean environments, namely: autism and autoimmune diseases.

The relationship among autism, autoimmune diseases, and wellness centers around the idea of exposure to toxins. Blatantly, that exposure to toxic substances causes the body to malfunction on a deep, almost mysterious level. Both autism and many autoimmune diseases remain poorly explained in terms of pathophysiology, specifically in terms of triggers and causes. There are numerous models

3 Sontag, Illness as Metaphor, 162.
of “the autistic brain,” none of which have been conclusively proven, especially given the wide variety or scale of autistic individuals. Likewise, autoimmune diseases and specifically those that develop later in life and frequently present as or include various kinds of food allergies or intolerances (or other environmental allergies), which are most often the focus within a wellness model of autoimmune diseases, also remain poorly explained. Most often the reason given within the personal narratives found on wellness-focused blogs and within popular science or health journalism is that contemporary crops are toxic, whether because of GMOs or pesticides or simply the fact that “modern humans” are not “designed” to eat certain foods. The high incidence of food allergy and autoimmune narratives in wellness is self-perpetuating: autoimmune diseases take years, on average, to diagnose, during which time people may be more likely to reach a stage of holistic, “natural” remedies than they would be if given more prompt, accessible and clearly explained medical treatment. Being more likely to participate in this kind of media makes the incidence of food allergies or autoimmune diseases seem disproportionately high; it also makes it seem like practices that people with documented medical problems need to do are things that all people should do, regardless of how well they may be to begin with. The standards for wellness are thus an inspirational goal for everybody while paradoxically being set by those who are the least well.

On the other hand, within a wellness rhetoric, autism is easily explained: autism is caused by vaccines. Despite study after study and the personal statements of scientists involved in the initial research that clearly document the deep and unethical flaws incurred, a 1998 study showing correlation between the MMR (mumps, measles, and rubella) vaccine and autism continues to be taken as fact. This is not actually very different from a few of the narratives of illness that Susan Sontag cites in Illness as Metaphor: Turgenev’s On The Eve, where “the hero of the novel realizes he can’t return to Bulgaria... he sickens with longing and frustration, gets TB, and dies”; Uncle Tom’s Cabin, wherein Little Eva is able to “announce[e] to her father a few weeks before the end,” and then promptly die at the announced time; or James Joyce’s The Dead,
when “he said he did not want to live and a week later he dies.”4 Wellness, too, is an easy explanation.

It is not really accurate to say that wellness only makes it seem like food intolerances and autoimmune diseases are hugely common because they are, in fact, increasing in incidence rates. And it is also true that there has yet to be a proven explanation for this rise in related diseases. But it is still not inaccurate to say that wellness attracts people who have or think they have one of these conditions and, furthermore, that the rise in autoimmune diseases makes it that much more likely for a person consuming wellness media to know someone with an autoimmune disease or allergy. Autoimmune diseases and allergies are very real. At the same time, not only because they remain poorly understood but also because the array of symptoms such conditions can cause is vast, it makes it seem that much more likely that only something foreign to the body, something unidentifiably toxic, could cause this much damage. This is further reinforced by the frequent invisibility of both cause and the condition itself. As Sontag writes: “The marks on the face of the leper, the syphilitic, someone with AIDS, are signs of a progressive mutation, decomposition; something organic.”5 An absence of visible signs makes it all the easier for it to seem like something inorganic is happening.

Wellness is good and feeling good and looking good but it also allows for or asks for necessarily strong, almost harsh, discipline. This is obvious in the kinds of measures suggested for failure in everyday practices (i.e. the 30-day cleanse post-holiday season) as well as in responses to the perceived toxic inorganicness of autoimmune diseases and food intolerances. One need look no further than “gluten-free” to see a prime example of this attitude. “Gluten-free” is a set of dietary practices that involves a complete removal of gluten, a protein found in wheat and other grains, from one’s diet, in addition to the purchase of specialty “gluten-free” or “certified gluten-free” items and the preparation, at home, of “gluten-free” recipes utilizing said “gluten-free” ingredients in order to create a perfect simulation of foods that do, in fact, contain gluten. In other words, the best and most well way to be “gluten-free” is to do it by

4 Sontag, Illness as Metaphor, 22–24.
5 Sontag, Illness as Metaphor, 129.
buying and spending time preparing things that make it seem like there is no absence of gluten whatsoever. Like you are giving up nothing. Like “gluten-free” is identical to living with gluten, only more well.

It would be easy to dismiss “gluten-free” as just another fad diet if not for three key features. First, because “gluten-free” is a set of practices involving consumption, labor, and social activity, all of which is, crucially, tied to a set of beliefs, it encompasses far more than other fad diets. The set of beliefs involved centers on a conviction about the toxicity of GMOs or the toxicity of modern wheat or the toxicity of modern agriculture and food processing. Because it is not just a diet, “gluten-free” is also not just or at all about weight loss. It is about feeling better. This feature also highlights the way in which sub-practices of wellness can and do dovetail with other forms of lifestyle-beliefs; in this case, the emphasis on feeling well and de-emphasis on weight loss, even through diet, align closely with mindful eating practices and the “Health at any size” movement. Lastly, “gluten-free” differs from fad diets like low-fat or low-carb because those diets encompass, essentially, all foods and by their very names suggest limited but still present quantities of the vilified substance. “Gluten-free,” on the other hand, demands complete eradication of a single protein found in a handful of grains. There is no scale or level of acceptability: only total eradication. “Free.”

Total eradication in the face of mysterious, inorganic, toxin-caused disease is the mechanism at the heart of most wellness practices. Wellness urges not only “gluten-free” but also: many other forms of eradication diets (Whole30, paleo, refined-sugar free), technology-free time periods, clutter-free living (see: Marie Kondo and the cult therein),\(^6\) reducing plastic items entering the home, and so on. All of the practices and the media surrounding them are self-perpetuating and assert, over and over, that clean living is all that’s needed. Wellness thereby denies the reality of illness and asserts itself as the only condition: if you live well (if you really live well and clean and do the detoxes and cleanses in the event of mistakes), then you will not get (these) illnesses. The wellness body is the prevented body.

\(^6\) See Marie Kondo’s website: http://tidyingup.com/.
Prevention is a privilege. It is somewhat remarkable that, within wellness media, chronic illness seems a privilege as well. On the one hand, it is true that by the middle of the 20th century, “adults who would have previously died of infectious diseases were saved by sulphanomides and postwar antibiotics and thus moved on to the diseases of middle and old age.” Living long enough to get the kinds of disease frequently characterized as chronic is indeed a privilege. On the other hand, this flies in the face of epidemiological morbidity research that clearly demonstrates the correlation between illnesses like obesity, for example, and conditions of systemic oppression like poverty: chronic illness, of some kinds, very much does not come from living in and with privilege. How, then, does wellness figure chronic illness as a privilege? It is an impression gathered based on the various kinds of illness mentioned most frequently within wellness: food intolerances are the perfect example here. Not just because this is a chronic condition that generally requires little to no medical treatment perhaps beyond consultation: a food intolerance is a condition that can be managed entirely through diet and lifestyle. Like through buying specialty “certified gluten-free” items and having the leisure time to do so. Also, inasmuch as a food intolerance is distinct from a food allergy, a condition characterized by an immune system response that can result in emergency states like anaphylactic shock, a food intolerance is not deadly. And what a privilege being sick in this way is (provided there is no actual economic hardship preventing the purchase of “certified gluten-free” or other needed products, a hardship never mentioned in wellness). Additionally, chronic illness in wellness is a privilege because of the kinds of disease not mentioned therein: heart disease, obesity, stroke, hereditary diseases, diseases of old age, degenerative conditions, other physical disabilities. Not mentioned: diseases associated with poor people, people of color or other marginalized populations, that could have been prevented if given enough education (obesity, heart disease) or could never have been fully prevented in the first place (genetic diseases, short of genetic diseases caused by genes being turned on because of toxic exposures). It is as if wellness can only imagine and discuss diseases it would be a privilege to

have when compared to many other, unimaginable, diseases. The well body is only “likely” to get certain diseases related to exposure to toxins and never anything associated with less privileged populations—many of whom may indeed be exposed to toxins as a result of economic, geographic, and racial discrimination, as in the recent case of lead contamination in the water of Flint, MI. “Considering illness as a punishment is the oldest idea of what causes illness.”

Discussing privilege within wellness necessitates a larger discussion of the well body. Thus far, the objects, practices, and images associated with wellness have been identified, but who purchases them, participates in, and aspires to these things? What are the characteristics of the well body? And it is a clearly definable body, especially when extrapolating from these images and related content, just as there was often a clearly identifiable body that was illness (as metaphor). For example, tuberculosis produced a body in which “debility was transformed into languor,” with illness becoming “a kind of interior décor of the body,” analogous to clothing. In short, tuberculosis was inseparable from the aristocratic, artistic, and highly romanticized individual it produced. This individuality was so valued and idealized during the Romantic period that Sontag details, and this idealization fueled the production of a tuberculosis body during a time period in which rapid industrialization and a dissolving aristocracy meant that class markers like these could be entirely constituted visually. Furthermore, it was not only the bodies of those who actually had tuberculosis that were marked by it. The delicacy, paleness and thinness of the TB body continued to influence fashion well into the 20th century—see: heroin chic.

The well body’s defining characteristics are its hypersensitivity and vulnerability to the environment. This contrasts with the simultaneous trait of physical fitness, usually expressed by participation in yoga, Soul Cycle, or related activities (Soul Cycle, in fact, seems to have such strong support within wellness it could easily be said that Soul Cycle is the new sanatorium). The hypersensitive nature combines with fitness to reinforce the requirement that the well body surround itself with clean organic objects, as much to avoid exposure as to support its level of fitness. Through this

8 Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 133.
hypersensitivity and fitness, the well body is thin and pale, but more so, it is the epitome of health: wellness is the glowing body.

Through this aesthetic, wellness marks a body with a very particular blend of vulnerability and fitness, presenting a hypersensitive feminine whiteness. These are class markers that further mark a body as one with ample leisure time and income (for paying for and attending yoga, Soul Cycle, specialty grocery stores, farmers markets, time for participating in wellness media itself): this leisure time and income is in no way wasted on the well body. It recognizes its purchasing power and votes with its dollars (see: the rapid shift among large food companies to incorporate cage-free eggs, natural, non-GMO, or fair trade items into their product lines) and has the education to do so. In short, the well body is one that can continually attend to and get the very best for its own support and care (out of choice and leisure and not out of medical necessity or debilitating illness). Wellness is its own pursuit.

Wellness is a body glowing with good health, but it is crucial here to draw a distinction between health or healthy and wellness. Doing so is best supported by providing an example of a prototypical well body: Carol, the protagonist in Todd Hayne’s 1995 film Safe, played by Julianne Moore. Living in Los Angeles, Carol suddenly finds herself suffering from bizarre attacks: headaches, nose bleeds, shortness of breath. These attacks come seemingly at random, when a new couch is delivered to her house or as she is driving or at a baby shower. One day, Carol sees a flyer for a talk being given about something called environmental illness, and having received little to no treatment from both her doctor and psychiatrist, she decides to attend. The talk she hears not only confirms Carol’s illness (as environmental) but provides much needed support, emotional support she had not been receiving from her husband or doctors, who seem mostly to consider her illness hysterical and psychosomatic. But it’s not. And it is worth noting that it is only around this time, as Carol becomes sicker, but more importantly as she learns more about environmental illness, that bruises begin appearing on her face. As if, like the marks on a leper, now that the disease is known, definite and organic, what had been invisible can be made manifest and clearly marked, and can seem organic.

It may seem paradoxical to suggest that Carol, a sick person, is the prototypical well body. But she is exactly this body, like a
resuscitated poster child. Carol asserts the importance and validity of wellness through her very physicality, by demonstrating that (even in the absence of a single identifiable cause or source) “environmental” toxins can and will make you ill. Carol asserts the supremacy of wellness as a rhetoric as well, inasmuch as her turn away from her family and traditional medicine and towards the environmentally ill group she finds, ultimately going so far as to move to a retreat center the group runs, demonstrates that those around you may never believe in and validate a hypersensitive vulnerable nature: only wellness is really there for you. Carol goes beyond just the wealthy, white, sensitive femininity that represents wellness so well, because her experience of finding a community run by people who have had the same experiences she has demonstrates a core wellness value: the need for communities led by individuals who have been through it themselves, and the value of the individual experience turned expert advice. This expert advice and the fact that wellness requires instruction is exactly what distinguishes wellness from healthy. Healthy is the FDA, myplate.gov, salad bars, a gym; healthy is mediocre. Healthy is mediocre because of its insistence on democracy and accessibility, especially when compared to the exclusive, individualized, and expert advice offered by wellness. The value placed on individual experts within wellness illustrates key attitudes towards control and trust, reinforced continually within wellness media: that practices related to health should not be trusted when prescribed by the government (see: vaccines, GMOs); that managing wellness should be firmly within the hands of individuals (which may paradoxically provide a veneer of accessibility, until it’s noted that the practices for best managing wellness remain, financially and geographically, inaccessible for the majority of people); that only other people with authentic experiences can be trusted. Frequently, personal blogs devoted to wellness will note, in “About Me” sections, that their writers are not certified nutritionists or medical professionals, as if their advice should be taken with a grain of salt when, ironically, this very lack of credentials is what lends them credence. Carol’s doctors had no idea what was wrong with her: only others like her did.

This attitude demonstrates further aspects of the role of the personal within wellness. First, just because Carol can be considered a prototype of the well body does not mean that wellness really allows
for that level of sickness anymore. By placing value on the personal over the professional, wellness presupposes an absence of any serious medical condition that would require care beyond the advice of other people who have been through it. After all, the reoccurring and predominant personal narrative found in wellness media—“I left my [boring, toxic, draining] [job, city, relationship] for a new practice of [vegan, clean, whole] [baking, cooking, making], along the way healing [my autoimmune disease, my food intolerance, my child’s autism]”—points to one thing, and one thing only: wellness is the best medicine.

Wellness is and is not new. There are certainly new developments and trends within wellness but some of its basic premises are longstanding. As John King wrote in the 1800s: “Although there are many maladies in which medical and medicinal treatment cannot be dispensed with, yet I am fully convinced that nearly, if not quite, one-half of the sicknesses which come under the care of medical men, could and ought to be cured solely by recourse to hygiene.”

As old as an idea of illness as punishment is, illness as punishment for uncleanliness is perhaps even older. What is contemporary and distinctive about wellness is the nature of the uncleanliness it seeks to manage and the media through which it does so. The exposure and fear at the heart of wellness is one of a distinctively chemical and industrial nature. It is not the uncleanliness of darkness or dampness that King was most probably thinking of when he called for hygiene. The cleanliness of wellness is not about germs or infectious diseases or, really, any disease other people could probably give you. It is entirely about things that can be done to your body without your even knowing it, because the “done to” is transmitted through acts that seem perfectly innocuous, like vaccines or eating wheat. Staying clean is about avoiding things like “industrial” or “environmental”: things that are directly opposed to the personal and individual. Wellness is hyper-attentive to the individual. Wellness is for you. And what benefits, beyond the physical, it can provide: “The Romantic view is that illness exacerbates consciousness. Once that illness was TB; now it is insanity…[that brings] paroxysmic enlightenment.” Now it is wellness.

10 Weisz, *Chronic Disease in the 20th Century*, 3.
The enlightenment of wellness is directly related to the media through which it enlightens. Instead of relying solely on books, in-person meetings, support groups, or brochures distributed through doctor’s offices or governmentally, as many public health campaigns, fad diets, and general health media does, wellness is accessible and participatory across many social media platforms. Instead of relying on only the publication of cookbooks, which may only be able to focus on a single dietary approach and a set number of recipes, wellness can exist through blogs, whose endless format and constant updating allows for multiple approaches (i.e. the vegan and gluten-free baking blog). Blog formats similarly allow for their authors to revise in real time as recommendations and nutritional advice shift, as seen in the years-long narrative arc of soy, once thought of as a healthy and readily available vegan source of protein but now a food to be avoided because what is readily available is only GMO. Instead of a single brochure with advice and a few images you may pick up from your doctor, wellness can exist on Instagram, which creates a daily and ongoing visual demonstration of a wellness lifestyle. Likewise, Pinterest also allows for a visually accessible and ongoing collection of wellness content. And across any platform, wellness is as easy to participate in as clicking a “pin it” button. Wellness is for you, by you.

While inextricably linked to the development of social media inasmuch as the widespread, ongoing, visually present nature of wellness would not have been fully possible prior to this media, wellness can also be linked to several other recent developments: growing awareness of climate change and the way that certain forms of media coverage of climate change make it seem, at once, like a way in which our environment is becoming toxic to us and as a set of responsibilities in consumption habits; governmental failure to contain certain things identified as toxic, both figuratively and literally, whether terrorism or lead; the local and whole food movements and, specifically, media coverage therein and the way this media has been created and adopted by both science journalism and foodies, i.e. both as science and aesthetic; the medicalization of everyday life and an increasing number of recognized conditions (to the point of beginning to distinguish between a condition, like a food
intolerance, and a disease, like Celiac’s); an increasing number of recognized conditions while simultaneously more and more diseases are becoming treatable, creating a catch-22 of becoming healthier and healthier while wondering what else you may have; globalization and the reoccurring discovery of uniquely healthy populations (being expressed, for example, in popularizing the “superfoods” these populations eat); the obesity epidemic and the growing belief that everything that has been popularized by both the government and fad diets is incorrect, funded by multinational corporations, and directly and solely responsible for said obesity epidemic. But, most notably, wellness can be linked directly to the rise in rates, as previously mentioned, of autism and autoimmune diseases.

In AIDS and Its Metaphors, Susan Sontag notes that “illnesses like heart attacks and influenza that do not damage or deform the face never arouse the deepest dread.” Until now. There is something paradoxical about the degree of fear that is generated around autism and autoimmune diseases, because neither is (commonly) a disease that will kill you nor visually deform you. And yet wellness does generate exactly this fear. Because in a culture that values not only long-standing beliefs about self-made people but also more recent ideals about the presentation and representation of oneself, especially in the very social media in which wellness operates, these diseases represent one of the biggest contemporary fears: the inability to be oneself. Specifically the inability to authentically be oneself and the inability to authentically represent oneself. And furthermore, autism and autoimmune diseases represent the worst-case scenario in which this inability could happen because in both diseases you—whether through a body that cannot identify its cells as itself or through “the autistic brain”—are the one preventing yourself from doing so. Wellness is easier. Wellness and the “toxins” it posits as the worst imaginable sources of danger are actually much easier to admit than a problem that is, ultimately, you; a disease that is inseparable from you and who you are is worse and more difficult to imagine than a disease caused by your iPhone or wheat or GMOs. Not just difficult to imagine that a disease and its cause are one and the same as you and your body, but an outright impossibility: vaccines cause autism at an age between a few months and a few years,

12 Sontag, Illness as Metaphor, 128.
indicating that “the autistic brain” is not something that simply is. Everything could have been prevented. Illnesses are not things that really happen, that do not happen for any unidentifiable reason, and that do not happen to you. Wellness is the impossibility of illness. Wellness is the notion that ultimately, avoiding exposure to toxins is not enough, because the aesthetic of wellness and its practices provides a way to continually demonstrate the importance of how you are really being the best and most well and most authentic you possible. Wellness is you being your own impossibility of illness. Wellness is the best medicine.

How, then, and within this context, to understand a sick body that is comically, insanely, paradoxically, or fittingly, the most well body possible? Which is to say, through and because of illness and the specificities of what a pancreas needs, I am all of this. Having been sick long enough, cared for it long enough, and absorbed these practices of care deeply enough, this is not just a matter of practicing wellness: it is being wellness. Not a well body, necessarily. But one that is, beyond being visibly white, thin, and feminine, engaged constantly in practices of protecting-from-harm-through-ingestion. I have a low-fat, low-glycemic, low-allergen diet. I don’t eat wheat, most dairy, any meat, legumes, a handful of certain fruits and vegetables, processed foods, refined or added sugar, anything that is fried; there is an obvious reason I refer to this generally as either the water diet or the nothing diet. Having done this for long enough, I am at least thirty pounds lighter than the average American woman, especially given the exercise I do daily (exercise being one of the best diabetes preventions even in an unavoidable case of pancreatic damage-induced diabetes — called Type 3, an unpopular form).

Instead of achieving and enjoying, relaxing into, the glowing well body this (should) produce, my wellness is distinctly uncomfortable. Though the well body may be the prevented body, prevention is often uncomfortable; constant perception of risk within a daily environment is uncomfortable. This, no money can adequately attend to. This, this is the only true wellness and authenticity available to the sick: the perfect appearance of ultimate health through illness. The joke is on all of us. The joke is embedded in and perpetuated through the play of privileges in different spheres. The joke is being so thin that routine surgeries, like a possible gallbladder removal, become dangerous in a body with so little room to
move equipment around in, or in other procedures during which pediatric-sized equipment becomes necessary. The joke, a crueler joke, is in social moments when my eating disorder is assumed, or when it is assumed that I must enjoy and take pride in being so thin and not, in fact, see it as a sign of imminent bodily decomposition: pancreatitis is characterized by pancreatic enzymes that digest and injure surrounding tissue, essentially digesting the body itself and how else can I see weight loss except as an extension of this? This is what is authentic. This is the thin well body produced by itself. This is what you want? This is what you think looks good? Wellness may be the best medicine, but sickness is what is only, truly, for life.