

Inside Out

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1. I am hung up on fish. Most of what I can see is a fish being pulled out of dark water, slapping against the grain of boardwalk, mouth agape and primed to be hooked. There's a hand hovering above, a hand ready to do what it came to do: cut, gouge, release, tug, and stuff. The hand domineers. It partially covers the sun, letting only a slight bit of light shine on the unfolding scene. There's a voice near me, and I know my response is courteous. But all I can feel is fish.

2. When I was younger, I felt distinctly open. I thought everything inside my body was felt and seen outside by everyone else. I always struggled to understand why, when motioning to my mom that something was rising up my chest, she did not immediately understand me. If I felt it, then didn't everyone else feel it too?

3. I'm standing over a dinner table, watching an esophagus get probed on the dinner plate. A knife and fork lay beside it; it's a table for just one. I watch the probe snake deeper into the folds of the muscle, trying not to compare what I see on the plate to what I've seen in my own medical records. I want to look without distinguishing, to try and pay attention only to the organ in front of me. I want to hold the plate in my own two hands.

4. Locating a true beginning point feels impossible. There's an uncanniness in having something always be *so there*. When I reached the age where I could vocalize basic feelings without trouble, I grasped any words I knew of to describe what I felt. *There's something in my throat*.

No, not there. Down there. But it's moving up. It's sharp. It's hot. Sometimes for a while. No, that doesn't help. I don't really know.

5. In Mona Hatoum's 1994 video installation *Corps étranger*, video footage of her endoscopy and colonoscopy is projected into a 12-meter wide tube that viewers can enter. The ultrasonic rhythm of Hatoum's heartbeat plays in the background. Hatoum aimed to disorient the viewer with her footage, to breach the conceived boundaries of the body and open it to intrusions from foreign objects and bodies.

6. I quickly spit out what I know: I can't swallow my food anymore. I'm choking on most things unless I take sips of water with each bite. I tell this to the doctor I've already decided I don't like, whose words end with a tone of flat disinterest. She doesn't break eye contact with me. She starts speaking about things I don't understand, cells I haven't heard of and anatomical anomalies I cannot imagine. She chides my mom on why I was never brought in earlier for this. *At your age of sixteen...* she begins to say. To me, this is a needless statement, and my dislike turns into a pointed irritation.

7. During the Renaissance, the internal organs of the body were thought to contain a person's moral and emotional consciousness. The viscera held one's sacred truth, functioning in tandem with the brain. The invisibility of these organs beneath our skin is precisely what gave them such power; accessibility to them was considered possible only when the person was on the edge of death.¹

These constructs fell apart as post-Renaissance understandings of the body leaned more towards separation.

1 Hillman, "Shakespeare's Entrails," 15

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Viscera were transformed into physical systems whose functions were more mechanical than they were emotional. Bodily openings and orifices became threats as the body became closed off, less open and porous than it had ever previously been thought of.

8. I did not wake gently. I wake with a startle, wondering how it was possible for 50 minutes to have vanished from my memory. The nurse gives me applesauce. I take stock of myself and the newfound soreness of having a foot long probe snaked down my throat. I tell myself I shouldn't feel how I do, but something stirs inside. Warmth rushes to my face. A cutting intrusion settles within my chest as the grogginess in my head lifts.

9. My doctor speaks to me about structural damage, the beginnings of tissue remodeling. She tells me about white blood cells that have accumulated inside my upper and lower digestive tract. *There's a name for this*, she says, as she strips off her purple latex gloves. The monotone of her voice grates me. I'm suddenly more aware of every contraction of the esophagus than I ever was to begin with.

10. Along with *Corps étranger*, Hatoum created another installation in a similar format. In *Deep Throat*, she projected a five-minute looped video of the full journey through an upper gastrointestinal tract onto a dinner plate atop a dinner table. The camera squeezes its way through the esophagus, then through the lower digestive system, before the video loops back to the beginning. Created in 1996, the installation has since been shown in various museums, asking viewers to consider the effect of projecting something so interior and violating onto such a domestic and familiar setting.

11. What I hated most about my doctor was knowing that no matter what, she would always have been the first person who ever saw inside me.

12. I've never been sure of what to do with medical diagnoses. They grind like worms into my head.

13. It would be years of medication trials, esophageal scopes, and a gradual worsening of pain before I asked for help. I was speaking to a different doctor; he was newer, vastly more experienced with this type of pain. There was even a bit of hope behind my apprehension. After listening to me, he jumped into an action-plan: he would need to probe me again, down my esophagus and up my colon, in order to truly get a sense of me and my internal functioning.

14. *It's easy. I go down your throat, flip you over, up the butt. One-two. Done. Double-oscopy. Almost like a fish.*

15. Some days are fine. Those days, I can mostly forget I have a system of internal organs working to help me along. Other days, they groan their presence at me. A pained body is like a leaky thing, one that can't quite close itself off from anything else. Those days, I want to eternally refuse any more probing and prodding. No more fishing, no eyes wandering through me. I want myself as I am, and know my rhythms as they are: stubborn, odd, my own.

Bibliography

Hillman, David. *Shakespeare's Entrails*. Springer, 2006.

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