

Cover Page

The following document is a creative nonfiction piece called “Doll Body.” The original assignment asked us to consider a culinary revelation we once had, whether it was one pivotal moment or a series of moments. In the piece I examine the ways in which the female body is examined and critiqued, especially in the context of romantic love, and the implications behind what we choose to eat and how we choose to interact with our loved ones. The original audience was only intended for peer review and for class feedback. However, I strongly believe that many women will resonate with aspects of the piece.

Doll Body

Falling in love should make you want to eat.

Anthony Bourdain once said that the sexiest thing you can do on a date is to eat with abandon, to not be self-conscious about whether there's food on your face or if your order is going to make you look fat. "For a dinner date, I eat light all day to save room, then I go all in: I choose this meal and this order, and I choose you, the person across from me, to share it with. There's a beautiful intimacy in a meal like that. It's about exploration and taste. And kissing after dinner. And maybe there's a little wine and curry on your breath... and that's nice."

Like many other things in life, I thought I understood this until I really fell in love with a person.

There were a few before him, of course. My childhood best friend who would bite into tomatoes whole like an apple and dare me to try it too. Who introduced me to my favorite snack, cucumber slices with salt and lemon, and I still think of her when I cut one up. Who always brought me back M&Ms from Chile when she visited her family. They tasted so much richer than the ones in America.

My first boyfriend in college, who bought me expensive crab legs on our anniversary and watched me tear them apart with a smile. Who smacked me on the ass when I made him scrambled eggs and told me I'd make a good wife, and it felt like we were playing house. Who started our Sunday night tradition of getting high and going out for burgers and milkshakes.

They were alike in their treatment of my body. They nourished me, and held me endlessly. I felt so fragile and depressed at times that their care was all I needed. She, who would find any excuse to lay on top of me like a heavy puppy. He, who would encourage us to have sex

upwards of five times a day. It felt good to be needed, to know that they couldn't get enough of me. Maybe, because my body was so yielding, I gave them the idea that it was on display, preserved in one state forever, and open to all comments.

She, in some ways, I can forgive more easily. We were girls together, and her self-hatred ran deep. Martina did not believe that I found her curves beautiful. She did not believe that her thick black hair, cut short in a bob, and the mole below her heart-shaped lips, were features I would want. She also did not believe that I was capable of sadness, that my life was imperfect; she grossly overestimated my popularity in school, as we lived hours away from one another and mostly talked on the phone; she felt that she understood me better than anyone, yet put me down for trying to be anything but her own image of me. Mostly, she treated me like a butterfly she had pinned beneath glass. "Your butt is so pale! Your boobs are so small!" she would cackle when we changed into our swimsuits. "You draw your eyebrows too thick," she would comment behind my shoulder in the mirror. "You're like my dumb little sister," she would scoff, a mere two months older than me. And, the one I hated the most, in regards to her secret older boyfriend in Chile: "You can't ever meet him. He'll fall in love with you instead."

I felt sick in my bones when she made these comments. I know now that she was insecure. I know now that she had been taught to hate her own body, and it made her viciously mean. It made her desperate for control. But she forgot that I, too, was a teenage girl.

I was scared of her sometimes. Each time we saw one another, I wiped my phone clean so she could not go through it and see the life I lived without her. To appease her, it was best to let her think that she was my whole world. And yet, somehow, she was. Somehow, I was still in love with her.

If I tried to tell her, I believe she purposely misheard me. When we laid on her bedroom floor together, that last time I saw her before I went to college, she said that most people probably thought my eyes were brown, but she could see up close that they were a deep shade of green. They're beautiful, she told me. And then, after a moment of nothing but synchronized breathing, "Why are you looking at me like I'm going to kiss you? I'm not."

After that, all I ever heard from her was that I was not myself. That only she knew the real me, and every version I showed to others was a facade. That I had become a different person, and was abandoning her. I didn't want to believe this was true. Our families were close friends; I loved her parents deeply, and their house with the burning incense and the spinning records and the hours of wine-drinking. I thought we were fated to be in each other's lives forever. But she had promised to follow me to college and did not. She had promised to like my friends and did not. She had promised to love me unconditionally and did not. I think she wanted to, but couldn't. Though the guilt wracked me at night, I eventually chose to become a ghost in her life. I am sure I haunt her as much as she haunts me.

He, I am less inclined to forgive.

Between my freshman and sophomore year of college, I lost fifteen pounds. I lived at home, in a surreal shadow of a summer vacation, in which I had been gone for a year and now nothing and everything was the same, and I worked an office job and drank vodka with my high school friends and developed debilitating chronic nausea.

"You're not pregnant, are you?" my dad kept asking me, as I wretched in the mornings and sprayed cherry-flavored numbing spray down my throat to get the gagging to stop.

I was not. There were boys and girls that first year of school, but I still had yet to go *all the way*. I didn't know what was wrong with me. Mostly, I think I just didn't understand that I was deeply sad.

I ate nothing but brown rice and hummus for three months. I had five tests done to ensure I was not dying of cancer, the way my mom was two years before. And then I went back to college, and, apparently, my body was everything.

"You look amazing!" Anuki gushed when she saw me. My shorts gapped and fell loose at my waist. I stared at myself in the dorm room mirror. How had I been so unaware of the change that was happening to me?

Mostly, I didn't believe the compliments. I resented my weight loss. I had spent so many of my teen years looking younger than I was, underdeveloped with no curves or breasts, and went through a sudden and late puberty in high school, when soccer strengthened my muscles and my hips quickly filled out. I began wearing leggings that hugged my figure, swishing my ass when I walked. I giggled and pretended not to know why a soccer boy asked to see me do squats. I felt a sense of pride when I was catcalled at a gas station, and tried to ignore my racing heart.

Before that sudden puberty, I had envied Martina's womanly body, and I despised that she made me feel like a little girl in return. Then, for those blissful two years, even with my baby face, I walked and talked like a woman. Now, my belt cinched to the farthest hole to hold up last year's jeans, I felt that I looked like that little girl again.

"My ass is gone," I lamented to my roommate, who shot me an apologetic smile and nodded.

I had yet to really understand that a tiny figure was a dream to many. That a woman who looked like a girl would attract a very certain kind of man.

Cory, it should be noted, is not fully to blame for my body image. Neither is Martina. But I do know that the person you love should not treat you like a doll, pulling apart your doll limbs, painting makeup on your doll face, cutting the tits off your doll chest.

Cory did not poison my self-esteem, not in that way. He actually made me much braver, more confident. Sex was not scary with him. Drugs weren't either. He made me feel desirable. "You have the body of a porn star," he told me once, holding me by the waist. I was actually naive enough to consider that poetry.

But there were the constant fat jokes. Not about me, so I was allowed to laugh. Fat girls were disgusting and undesirable but he sure spent a lot of time thinking about them, laughing about them, shaming them. I tried to write it off. Everything he did and said was tinged with irony, so it was okay. Still I thought of my roommate, who had opted for the cafeteria's five-meal plan so she could force herself not to eat on the other two days. Still I thought of my older cousin, whose long slender fingers were beautiful, who kindly let me lay on her in my childhood and watch her play Animal Crossing, who I didn't know was anorexic. Still I thought of Martina, and the body she hated, and the body I had loved.

Cory seemed to have issues of his own. His diet was bizarre: raw spinach leaves and creamed corn and protein powder one day and Taco Bell the next. He went to the gym so much that I forced myself to start working out again to spend time with him. He cried often and his libido sometimes unnerved me. It's not just fat girls, I thought. It's his own fear of getting fat. And here I was, naturally thin. I just lost the weight by not eating.

It wasn't like that. At least I don't think it was. I truly do not think I was consciously avoiding food to lose weight. I was avoiding food because I had developed some strange somatic

reaction to all of the anxiety and depression that swirled around in me. I went through different iterations of this later in my life too. After the pandemic started, I became obsessed with my heartbeat, and couldn't sleep at night because I could feel it pounding too hard. When my friend was hospitalized with appendicitis, I fixated on the right side of my abdomen so intently that the entire side would go numb, or shoot with pain, seemingly out of nowhere. When my mom started cancer treatment again, I started grinding my teeth so hard that I had nightly dreams of them all falling out. My body and brain have always been at a disconnect. I don't seem to understand what one or the other is telling me, until I do. And then I can't stop. Then I am consumed entirely by the thought or by the sensation. Some call it hypochondria. Some call it OCD.

But I knew that with Cory, I did not want to eat, not really. I wanted to drink and smoke and drop acid and sleep together. I wanted him to want me. I wanted to cook for him. I wanted to go out to eat so that I could say we went out on a date and aren't we just the perfect couple. I wanted him to think my body was *perfect*. I also wanted to gain weight, even though he didn't want me to. I want my ass back, I kept saying. It's there, trust me, he would reply. I didn't believe him. I was consciously trying to eat more to gain weight, but I was also walking everywhere on campus and burning a lot of calories and going to the gym to keep up with Cory. By my junior year of college, I'd lost even more weight. I was down to the lowest I'd been since I was in middle school. 109.

Cory cheated on me a couple of times, broke up with me a couple of times, and then really drastically broke my heart when he made fun of a poem I wrote for him. I still allowed him to sleep with me, as my non-boyfriend friend with benefits, for six more months after that. The shame took a while to reach me, but once it did, two years worth of it poured into me at once.

Liam was different in so many ways. For one, he was the poet, and he was a whole lot better than I was. He was incredibly smart. His apartment was filled with books about communist revolutions and Beat poets and philosophy. He was also so unbelievably nice to me. It took him four hours of my being on his couch to make a move. He had a very gentle look in his eyes, like he was in bed with a fawn. And I held him at an arm's length.

My lovers were supposed to be mean to me! My lovers were supposed to choose my way of living for me!

Liam was vegetarian when we started dating. He claimed to be an amateur cook, but the stir-fry he whipped up for me when I was hungry—he had already eaten—tasted as good as takeout. When the pandemic sent us home during our last semester of college, we spent six months apart before we moved in together. On my end, I was abusing substances and taking care of my mom after her first of three brain surgeries. My life at home was dark again. This time, though, I did not vomit every morning; I quelled the physical sensation of anxiety with pills. I snuck hydrocodones and laid in bed listening to classical music, conducting an imaginary orchestra, pretending I was in control when I was the least in control I'd ever been. But on Liam's end, he was cooking. He was practicing for his audition: our living together. That summer of isolation was terrible for everyone, but the two weeks I spent at his home in Tulsa pulled me free from my spiral of self-sabotage and solidified my decision to move in with him.

His parents accepted me graciously. They had a pool and a sweet older dog and a beautiful house with a bright green kitchen. We had margaritas in the sunshine every day. His mother sat at the table with me in the mornings over coffee, asking me questions about myself, what I liked to write; she'd read some of my stories from my senior thesis, and a couple of my articles from the school newspaper, and even a book by Miranda July that I'd mentioned I liked.

Efforts were being taken to really get to know me. When conversation naturally ended, we watched the birds dance at the birdfeeders. His father, as quiet as I was, played cards with me, recommended books, asked after my mom, and taught me to eat the coffee bean from the glass of sambuca. Mostly, they fed me. They showed me how to use the pasta maker, and let me feed the dough through the grates into long fettuccine strips. They grilled shrimp, my favorite, even though Liam was allergic. They made me eggs and sausage every morning, and brought danishes home when they went out. His mother held my cropped tops in awe when she washed them. “They’re like little doll’s clothes!”

I knew this was the moment I started to fall in love with him, and with his family, and with this very possible future.

That first week in December of 2020, we hauled our belongings into a shoebox apartment in West Little Rock. I couldn’t help but weep, separated from my parents again—not happy to live with them, but not happy to be apart either, not in this fragile of a time. Liam quickly made the apartment into a home, baking Irish cheddar beer bread, cooking vodka sauce pasta (still our favorite), mixing White Russians or gin and tonics, frying tofu like my mom used to. He made me want to eat, and he made me want to cook, too. Not because it seemed like the natural role of a wife, but because I wanted to make him feel as good as he made me feel. I wanted to make recipes from my childhood to communicate something incommunicable. I wanted my food to melt in his mouth the way his melted in mine.

We taught one another in our early days. I didn’t know how to crush garlic with a knife to peel it. He didn’t know how to tell when meat was done. I didn’t know how to have an appetite again. He didn’t know how to always reach me. So he just kept bringing me food.

It was officially our second Valentine's Day together, but it was our first living on our own. We were snowed in, the beginning of a week-long stint of cabin fever, and Liam did not want to lay around in bed all day as I did. He had work to do. I was not allowed in the kitchen and busied myself unpacking boxes that were still shoved in the closet. By that evening, the light emanating from the street still bright-white with snow, he had our first course prepared: a spiced carrot and ginger soup, topped with cilantro. We dunked our homemade bread into the liquid gold, the spices tickling my nose, the sweetness of the carrot cut with the brightness of the ginger and the lemon juice. The second course was more thematic for the holiday. Bright pink pasta, a beet and goat cheese sauce that looked like candy, with the sour zing of the goat cheese and the mellow earthiness of the beets melding together to taste as sweet and decadent as it looked. I couldn't believe what was happening before me. Glasses of wine pursued, and the third course began: a rosewater and pistachio cake, ceremoniously topped with rose petals, spongy and light with the rich texture of the pistachios crumbling beneath each bite. By the end of the night, I understood his insistence on eating light for lunch. I could barely move off the couch, my head sleepy and swimmy from the wine, my stomach full and more than satiated.

For four sweet years, Liam and I have lived together. In that time I have seen my mom continually in and out of hospitals, a near decade of health problems swelling to a crescendo when she had an unexpected and mind-altering seizure. As she lay in a near comatose state, unable to recognize me and calling me her mother's name, I clutched a Tupperware of the ziti pasta Liam made for my dad and me. When we came home from my own trip to the hospital—a panic attack that led me to rock back and forth in the waiting room for hours, heart palpitating wildly, consumed by thoughts of every moral wrong I'd ever committed—I collapsed on the couch sobbing. It was like everything I'd suppressed, everything I'd swallowed back, everything

I'd tried to medicate, was coming to a head, and I was convinced it was going to kill me. Liam looked me in the eyes and said, "You *need* to eat." We had been in the hospital waiting for my EKG results for seven hours.

I received on and off treatment for my psychiatric needs, and an informal OCD and generalized anxiety diagnosis. I started an antidepressant that was also an appetite stimulant. Between the medications, the pandemic, the lack of exercise after four years of walking everywhere, and the amazing food that Liam was feeding me, by 2022, I gained forty pounds.

Just like when I'd lost the weight, I was unaware of what was happening to me. I had to buy new pants for my new job at the library anyways. All of my old clothes were slutty college clothes that I didn't mind retiring. When I stepped onto the scale in the work bathroom innocuously one day, my heart fell into my stomach.

154 pounds.

I had never seen a number that big on the scale. And it wasn't even that big. I knew plenty of women at that weight. I knew plenty of women bigger than that weight. And I had wanted to gain the weight anyways. Hadn't I?

I started to unhealthily fantasize about my weight in college. How silly I had been to resent being skinny. Everyone had loved me and wanted me when I was that size. I was beautiful then. Why had I wanted to throw it all away?

"I really don't see it," Liam said when I told him how much I'd gained.

I tried not to talk about it much. He clearly loved my body. But I was being consumed again. This time, I was purposely not eating. I was tracking calories. I was walking on the

treadmill for hours. I even went off the antidepressants, for a multitude of reasons, but weight certainly was one of them.

I had gone overboard.

I couldn't be fat. I had never been fat. I had been curvy, yes, but I was in shape. When I looked at myself in the mirror, I did not see the womanly body I had longed for. I saw a puffy, swollen face that made me look like a child. I saw a monstrous gut. I saw huge thighs. I saw a wide, sagging ass.

154 pounds looked good on other women. But on me, on my small frame, I felt that it swallowed me whole. I could not see the same person in the mirror.

For two years, I tried to shed the weight. I had had a fast metabolism as a kid; I expected to be able to drop it quickly. I'd so easily lost it that one summer, after all. But the process was so unbearably slow. I looked at old pictures of myself. I obsessed over my stomach in the mirror. If it was just a little flatter, if I could just lose five more, I'd be happy.

But the main problem was that I still loved food so much. I loved Liam's cooking. I loved working in the food industry, a sudden and impulsive change I made when I left the library. I loved writing about food and thinking about food and cooking food. And I wanted to go out to eat with Liam, too. To try new foods together. We shared a plate of oxtails and roasted carrots in a dimly lit Jamaican restaurant. We ate birria tacos and jerk chicken from food trucks. We ate funnel cake and fried pickles and pretzel dogs. We tried raw ahi tuna and pork belly with pineapple and duck confit. When we went on vacations, we took the restaurant options very seriously. When we went on dinner dates, we always picked something new. I was not afraid to eat in front of him, to eat with abandon, as Bourdain wisely advised. I was just afraid to do it too

many times, to lose control and go overboard again, to one day realize I was in someone else's body.

Every delicious meal we share together is a revelation that eating is better than not. That fresh, amorous oysters with hot sauce are better than vomiting every morning. That tortellini and velvety cream sauce are better than the body of a porn star. That homemade tomato soup and a luscious grilled brie sandwich are better than pills and cigarettes and emptiness.

I will never completely unlearn the societal standards of the way a woman's body should look. I will never completely forget the comments the people I loved once made, about my body, about their own body, about the bodies of strangers. I will never completely stop fluctuating, the way any woman does, and I will never completely stop comparing previous versions of myself. Once I am done being consumed by one thought or another, I will move on to the next one. But I do know that love will remind you to eat. Love will not fix everything, but love will be there to feed you, to validate you, and to value your thoughts and feelings and comfort over your physical form. It is so incredibly important for you to let yourself accept that love.