**Vignettes Transcript - Season 3: Episode 2: Body Language**

**Millie Baylis:**

Hi,

Welcome back to Vignettes: the EWF Podcast. I’m Millie, the Program Coordinator here at the Emerging Writers’ Festival, and today we’ll hear stories of the body.

I’m recording this from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay respect to their elders past and present, and to the elders of all lands that this podcast reaches.

For this episode, we asked three emerging writers who are creating really interesting body-focused work to consider the ways their bodies communicate. Today’s artists will reflect on bodies in pain and bodies in pleasure; what it means to inhabit a body in transition and a body in illness. They will consider both the ordinariness and specialness, as well as the resistance, of living in their bodies.

We actually pinched the title for today’s episode with permission from one of today’s artists, Oliver Reeson, whose excellent essay ‘Body Language: on Kylie Minogue, Cancer and Coming Back to Life’ helped inspire our thinking around this theme. You can read that essay at LitHub if you haven’t already, which we’ll link in today’s show notes. We’re really lucky to have Oliver reading a new piece for today’s episode, along with two other emerging writers we admire: Mia Nie and Tori Hobbs.

So to kick things off, here is Oliver Reeson.

Oliver Reeson is an essayist and screenwriter. In 2021, they are one of the recipients of The Next Chapter Fellowship, mentored by Maria Tumarkin. They are also the co-creator and writer of SBS web series *Homecoming Queens*.

**Oliver Reeson:**

Creation

I made a recording when I started T but either the microphone on my phone is broken or I covered it with my hand by accident, so you can’t really hear me speaking. I have no point of comparison now but I know my voice is deeper than it was. I notice it most when I laugh and it reverberates more strongly than before. I have always had sort of an annoying laugh. It is loud and kind of explodes sometimes and I always want to apologise for it.

I like the idea that my laugh is changing first because it’s as though I am releasing something in big yelps of joy whenever someone I love says something good.

Hard pivot to religion now. I know that creationism is just a story but as we use stories to make sense of most things I still consider it sometimes. The concept of Adam and Eve is to make us believe that we are all one family who should love each other because we’ve descended from the same pair of parents. Eating from the tree of knowledge taught Adam and Eve shame and then God gave them the boot because they didn’t like looking at their weird bodies anymore. Everyone kept fucking up and God got jack of it all and did that big flood and just saved Noah and his animals (and Noah’s family, I think?). But even Noah’s descendants kept right on sinning and I like this story because I like that God went to so much effort to start again but still found his design fatally flawed. It makes me like humans more, this story. I like that shame should have stopped us sinning but we just powered on like disgusting, joyful idiots.

I think that in some readings of the Torah the first human, Adam, had male and female features. In Plato’s Symposium, too, Aristophanes proposed that there were three different original beings, each with four arms and four legs and two faces. One was an all male form, one an all female form, and one a mix of the two. There is no flood in Aristophanes’ creation story but once again God grows to hate what he’s created and sends lightning bolts down that split these beings apart, leading them to forever search the world for their missing half.

Beyond my voice I want to say I haven’t noticed many changes this month. But changes are always happening even when I can’t articulate what they are. Looking in the mirror is changing. It is as though I used to have face blindness and now when I look the grey cloud is solidifying and I am beginning to see myself looking back. In subtle ways, my face is changing but anyone who sees me regularly won’t notice. I sent photos to a friend interstate and we agreed that the effect was disorienting. My face has changed but you can’t pinpoint where and the longer you look the more it slips away. There was a photo of Renee Zelweger on a red carpet a couple of years ago and everyone lost their minds over how different she looked. Some people said it was plastic surgery but others (Renee herself, maybe?) said she was just a woman aging. I remember looking at the comparison photos and comparing eye size, face width, distances between her features, but it was all the same. So, why did she look so different? Faces are weird. They are something like water, something in motion and reflective. Have you seen those videos where someone’s face changes drastically depending on the angle of the light shone on them? Everyone is aging and everyone’s cells are dying and regenerating and how you look today is not how you will look tomorrow and not how you will look in ten years time. Transitioning is just aging redirected.

My friend once told me they knew they were trans because they couldn’t picture themselves as an old woman – it freaked them out to imagine it. To begin my transition was scary because I wasn’t certain I was trans, because no one could give it to me in writing. The further along I get the more I know I made the right decision because I feel greater and greater comfort in being a physical thing. At the time, I couldn’t relate to my friend and I worried that meant I wasn’t trans, because my experience was different to theirs and I assumed being trans was something definitively diagnosable in a way no one had discovered yet. I assumed the pathology had to be the same (I only know how to respond to things as illnesses, I’m trying not to do this so much). Picturing myself as an old woman didn’t scare me because I couldn’t picture myself as anything. Picturing myself as an old woman, picturing myself as an old man, picturing myself as a four legged globe person—it was one and the same. Now I can picture myself older, I can picture myself with a life that extends. Being an old woman is a concept that scares me now but only in the sense that it reminds me how easy it could have been to miss the opportunity to live, how accustomed I was to the discomfort of living in a body I couldn’t recognise.

Aging is time accumulating on the body. I am changing nothing but the way my body catches time. As the months pass I am starting to look more like a pubescent boy, though I am still in this medical menopause, old and young in the one body. Are any of my friends really older than me? I feel closer to death than all of them.

An occasional thought: should I have figured this out earlier? Imagine if I had the means to get top surgery when I was 21. Would I have avoided the cancer thing entirely?

I grew up Catholic. I remember a priest telling a joke in his homily once. One man goes up to another and says, “Why are you banging your head against the wall?” The other man pauses, grins, and replies, “because it feels so good when I stop.”

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you Oliver. Next, we have Mia Nie.

Mia Nie is a Chinese-Australian comic artist, zine-maker, and award-nominated ex-poet. Her work explores the complexities, contradictions, and deeply felt desires of transgender subjectivity. She is passionate about understanding queer history and imagining queer futures. Mia is a recipient of The Wheeler Centre’s The Next Chapter 2020 Fellowship, and is currently working on her first graphic novel.

Mia Nie will be reading a new piece for us today that she also did the sound effects for.

**Mia Nie:**

Body Dangerous

Donnie leans against the ropes, his perfect body swollen with muscle. He nurses a broken rib, his face contorting with make-believe pain. He breathes in great heaves, chest expanding like a piece of mining equipment. He looks big as a house and hard as a boulder. His coach Rocky leans in close and delivers a rousing pep talk in his signature drawl. *Now he’s gonna come after you and he’s gonna try to break on that rib some more. But that’s okay. 'Cause you like the pain, you can take it. You know why? Because you’re dangerous.*

Donnie sucks air through his teeth, pushes out a sharp exhale. *I’m dangerous…* he whispers. I mouth the words with him, silently, like a prayer.

This scene is the climax of *Creed II,* the latest of eight movies in the *Rocky* franchise. They’re what my friend Stephen calls *lyric essays about the body*: stories about impossibly jacked guys beating each other to a pulp as an inchoate commiseration of their manly pain. I’m watching the series in its entirety for the second time this year. I’ve picked up boxing as a lockdown hobby. Every morning, I wake up and jog until my heart beats thrice a second. I close my hands into fists and hit my punching bag, a small leather balloon suspended by elastic ropes to the floor and ceiling. It bobs back and forth, side to side, like the head of an imaginary opponent. I dance around it, light on my feet, darting in and out of range, ducking, slipping, weaving. I do this in three-minute rounds, just like in a real fight. In between I sit down and recover. I imagine Rocky in my ear giving sage advice as I await the bell that summons me back to mortal combat. Imagination is very important to the boxing experience.

I’ve always liked punching. When I was a teenage boy, I would get drunk and bruise my knuckles against brick walls and telephone poles. I liked to imagine myself as a god of destruction, come to smash the entire world to pieces. Jeanette Winterson wrote that *if you are a man, it is easier to smash something on the outside than it is to feel what’s happening inside. Women know it’s inside, and so that’s what they smash. They smash themselves. I* was trying to smash both.

In boxing, punches are assigned numbers for shorthand. There are six basic punches and four variations: a lead hand jab is designated number 1, a rear hand cross is number 2, a lead hand hook is number 3, and so on. I get excited by this cipher because I feel like an expert, which is a big part of the fantasy. I’m obsessive. I’m a perfectionist. I practice every day, punching at an imaginary target. This is called shadowboxing and I’m told it’s an essential learning technique. Now that I’m an adult I don’t have to punch brick walls anymore; instead, I punch a made-up guy standing three feet in front of me. I start stringing punches together on my way to the fridge for ice cream, at the mirror after showering, in my bedroom before I sleep. My internal monologue is all encoded. *1-1-2-3-6.* Jab jab cross hook uppercut. *7-6-3-3-2.* Body hook uppercut hook hook cross. Rocky points at a mirror and goes, *This guy right here is your toughest opponent. I believe that in boxing and I do believe that in life.* He’s full of these little wisdoms.

Boxing is changing my body. My pectorals and deltoids are getting bigger every week, the thick bands of muscle fibre becoming shapelier and more defined. I feel conflicted about these changes. There are versions of my body that only exist in my imagination. These phantom bodies are a vague collage of contradictory images of successful womanhood; sometimes I’m a five-foot-two petite damsel, sometimes I’m a tall and distinguished matriarch, sometimes I’m an Instagram bimbo with huge tits and a dumptruck ass. According to Judith Butler, *fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside.* These are versions of myself I know I’ll never be, but they still haunt my imagination, ghosts of my impossible selves.

I think that if I never transitioned, I would’ve done something equivalent instead, like joining an alternative rock band. I have a fantasy of myself as the front man of some shitty Radiohead tribute act, effeminately crooning *I don’t care if it hurts, I wanna have control, I want a perfect body, I want a perfect soul…* Maybe this version of me could’ve been happier, or tragic in a more romantic way. It’s difficult not to internalise corrosive ideas about how I look. To be trans is to have a dangerous body. We are deviants, predators, gender failures. We are wretched and repulsive, not worthy of being touched. I can’t seem to shake the shame of my failed womanhood. Maybe that’s why I like boxing so much, why Ioveridentify with the fantasy of manly pain. It’s my consolation prize. Sometimes when I look at the mirror, I feel that I’m staring at someone else. I stand there scrutinising my naked shape. Is this really what I look like? Are my shoulders this broad? Is my jawline this thick? Maybe they’re right about me. I do look kind of dangerous.

I keep on shadowboxing. The more I practice, the better I get. *1-2-1-2-3*. The imaginary figure in front of me coalesces into a clear image of myself. This me is always male, the me that never transitioned, crooning effeminately in rock bands. *I don’t care if it hurts, I wanna have control*. *1-1-2-3-6.* I throw a huge right cross, he twists and the punch rolls off his monstrous shoulder. He’s ducking, slipping, weaving, throwing punches back in my direction. I’m fighting my toughest opponent – just like Rocky told me! *3-3-slip-7-2.* I breathe out with each punch, air hissing through my teeth sharply at the moment of contact. *SHH SHH SHH SHH*. It sounds like pistons. He lands a vicious shovel hook and cracks my rib. I don’t feel a thing. My body is a killing machine, impervious to pain. I’m wretched and untouchable. That’s what makes me strong. *6-5-2-3-4.* *You can take it, you like the pain*. Boxing is about imagination. I lean against the ropes, my body swollen with muscle. I’m nursing my broken rib, my chest heaving like a piece of mining equipment. I’m big as a house and hard as a boulder. Rocky leans in close. *You’re dangerous*. I say it thrice with my fist-shaped heart: *I’m dangerous I’m dangerous I’m dangerous.* I mouth it silently, like a prayer.

*Dear God, make me perfect, make me beautiful and true.*

*If you can’t, make me dangerous instead.*

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you so much Mia! And last but not least, Tori Hobbs.

Tori Hobbs is a queer, non-binary, disabled, low-income, Burgher writer and care worker living on Ngunnawal, Ngunawal and Ngambri land. They began their education and practice as a Registered Nurse on Boon Wurrung land. Now a Disability Support Worker, Tori focusses their energy on providing care, advocacy and support for disabled people in their community. Being on both the giving and receiving end of health and community care, Tori has a unique perspective on the industry. Tori hopes to invest their personal and professional experiences of ableism, care work, disability justice and its intersections into all that they do.

**Tori Hobbs:**

This has been recorded and written on the lands of the Ngunnawal, Ngunawal and Ngambri people. Their land was stolen and sovereignty was never ceded. This always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Thank-you to the EWF team for having me on this season of Vignettes. I’m Tori Hobbs, I’m a queer, disabled, non-binary, low income Burgher writer and care worker living on Ngunnawal, Ngunawal and Ngambri land. I began my education and practice as a Registered Nurse on Boon Wurrung land. Now as a Disability Support Worker, I focus my energy on providing care, advocacy and support for disabled people in my community. I hope to invest my personal and professional experiences of ableism, care work, disability justice and its intersections into all that I do.

The following piece is about body language through the lens of loving a body in pain, something many people with chronic illness and disability can relate to.

My body is a love language. Moments I share with myself in private. Providing a bridge of communication between my brain and everything else. Translating my nociceptors. Making my heart flutter. Providing explanation to all the ways in which I move. Involuntary or not. I’ve gone through waves of fluency in my body language. For a long time I lacked the words to describe the breadth of my body’s linguistics, the vastness of the love housed within. At times I didn’t know the full scope of what my body would grow to know, and all the ways I’d learn to interpret it.

On the best of my days, pain is a low hum at the back of my throat. A feeling close and far away all at once. Through work and rest, pain bleeds through it all. A familiar feeling that has become synonymous with living and loving, when I think back I struggle to recall a moment without it. My pain is ever evolving and ever present, a language my body is fluent in.

To be fluent in pain is to sport an accent of wellness, the appearance of living without pain. It’s the smile I wear to work whilst I nurse a spasm, the walk I make to the shops when my legs have lost feeling, the lies I tell to my doctor whilst I try to remember everything she, my physio, my specialist and my psychologist have all recommended. The routine things I do and movements I make everyday that give the illusion of health.

I’ve managed to nail my accent of wellness so perfectly that I’ve had others deny the existence of my language. I’ve cheated myself out of love and empathy as a protective mechanism against the threat of ableism and dismissal, all whilst the threat of immobility and lifelong disability continue to rage inside. At times I’ve dropped my accent in public when it’s grown too difficult to keep up. The language my body speaks has been at the cost of countless relationships, my career. To speak the language of my body without faltering comes hand in hand with the sacrifice of comfort.

The walls of my house see the transparency I long for, a different accent to the one I don outside. A language of love. I enter my front door and immediately remove my clothes, shedding the layers of wellness I’ve used to cover up pain, immobility, surgical scars, burn marks. I loosen my posture and sink into what feels comfortable, slumped shoulders and bloated abdomen. I cradle my tummy as if it were a newborn, fully distending it and allowing it to expand without prying eyes. I note it’s lopsidedness, the tightness of the skin like an inflated balloon. I haven’t been able to reach my toes without effort in years. I lay down on the couch and breathe in deeply. I allow the inflections in my voice to take over as I wince and writhe, sometimes never finding a comfortable position. I allow myself to be silent, creating a mental checklist of everywhere that hurts, starting over every time my list becomes illegible.

In private after a long day of shielding my pain from others, I allow myself to cry hot, angry tears about a body torn between love and war. I crumble the bridge between myself and my pains voice, swallowing tablets to muffle it. Distracting myself from the war within I use artificially generated electrical impulses, increasing the zapping when I become too numb. I velcro heat backs around my waist and limp to my resting place, a belt of warmth enveloping me as I cradle myself. I lay down on a yoga mat and attempt to ignore the little voice that berates me. The longer I lay, the voice grows stronger, bellowing in my ears. Savasana, I lay in corpse pose and long for silence in a quiet room. I’m seen in these four walls, and it’s within these walls that I further my relationship with the voice inside me. The voice that speaks a language I’ve been taught to fear.

Everyday, I awake with multiple forces waging a war against me, giving off the illusion of peace within a body at war. A body at war against linguicide; the pain takes up arms within me, gluing my organs together, a fortress of floppy uselessness. To love a body at war with itself means the warm embrace of the hum and the bellowing. A love rooted in resistance, a love ever evolving. To speak to the language of my body is to speak to the embrace of love in the face of pain, love enveloping even in solitude, love affirming.

**Millie Baylis:**

That was Tori Hobbs, and before them, Mia Nie and Oliver Reeson – we thank these writers for sharing their pieces on Body Language for today’s episode.

And thank you for listening to *Vignettes.* If you enjoyed this episode, please drop us a review and recommend us to your friends. It really helps. And stick with us over the next few weeks as we bring you more Spring readings.

I also just wanted to mention that the open artist call-out for the 2022 Emerging Writers’ Festival is now open! You can go to the EWF website to apply to be part of our festival before applications close on the 3rd of December.

This podcast was audio produced by Joe Buchan, and our theme music was created by Thu Care. You can find out more about the team behind this podcast and the artists featured in this episode on the EWF website at emergingwritersfestival.org.au

END EPISODE.