
Skinwalk

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BROOKE WONDERS

TO REMEMBER SEX WITH SOMEONE who's now dead is an act of necrophilia; to recreate a living person on the page a desecration.

EAR.

When his work finally relented and allowed men to wear jewelry, Rob dragged me out to the mall the very next day to get his ear pierced. This event was witnessed by a few curious twelve-year-old girls who were also at Claire's Boutique getting piercings. "Aren't you old for an ear piercing?" one asked him. "You're never too old to stab yourself in the head," he replied.

HAIR.

Rob was nearly hairless naturally, a state that he exacerbated by shaving pretty much everywhere, pretty much every morning—something I found intriguing and alluring. Us freshly scrubbed, me lying next to him, breathing near his neck, his skin smelled like the wind that whirled past my face when we went mountain biking together—evergreen forest, mountain air, neurotic clean living.

Proud daughter of a feminist, I was a furry creature when we met. I didn't start pulling, plucking, shaving, grooming until after Rob died, as if by replicating his habits I could keep him alive on my skin.

EYE.

Before we'd met, he'd gotten corrective surgery on his baby blues. He was as blind as me; wore Coke-bottle lenses all through elementary school, high school, college; was unable to recognize a face from a foot off, unable to find the bathroom light switch at night. Then his grandmother passed away, leaving a small inheritance, enough to cover the cost of LASIK. When we got together, Rob told me about his perfect vision, terribly proud; he was forever reading distant signs, trying to convince me to

go into a little debt for the sake of fixing my sight.

My grandmother passed away a year after Rob did, leaving me a small inheritance. With it, I got my eyes fixed, the surgery performed in a Xanax fever dream, complete with science-fictional torture chair, eyelids held open, eyeballs immobilized. LASIK is futurescience, the machine cutting while the patient lies still, still awake, the doctor performing surgery through the machine, no hands. When I sat up, I could see like Rob had seen.

Golfers found Rob's body soon enough that his parents were able to donate his eyes, although his other organs were unsalvageable. I've recognized his ice-blue irises, his pupils staring out from someone else's face.

MUSCLE.

My first professional massage I bought for myself after a friend of mine got in a massive car accident with me in the passenger seat. Afterward, I couldn't turn my head left or right. Unbeknownst to me, my parents had purchased a gift certificate and mailed it to me, remembering how much massage had helped my mother's back after her wreck. Since I'd already gotten one for myself, I gave the spare massage to Rob, his first ever. I went to pick him up for a post-massage lunch, and he gave me the softest, longest, meltingest kiss, and my eyes must have gotten really wide because he asked me, "What?" and when I explained that he'd finally learned how to kiss like a girl, he got all giddy. We dubbed it the massage kiss. I took to requesting them.

My second-ever massage was a few weeks after Rob's death. The masseuse, Paul, was one of perhaps three people who had been in recent contact with my dead lover's body. As I settled facedown on the massage table, I remembered that Rob had laid exactly here. Here exactly. Had the pressure helped him? Made

him happy, peaceful, relaxed, for even a second?

Paul asked me, "How would you like to feel when you leave today?"

I said into the pillow, "I'd like to leave feeling less sad." My therapist had this argument about grief being stored in the body, which is why I'd made the massage appointment. "If that's not too weird."

"Not weird at all."

Then, in an odd parallel, Paul launched into a speech very similar to the ones my recently acquired therapist had been giving me: whatever feelings come up, release them, hold nothing inside, etc. This is the hardest possible advice to take with everything shut-down, grief-struck, paralyzed in the aftermath of Rob's suicide.

"Emotion is like food; it has to pass through you." Yick, I thought, yick. "If you hold it inside, it'll manifest as pain or illness. Emotions you cling to will make you sick."

I thought about intimacy, and Rob's tattoo, an unfinished infinity symbol over his heart, a sideways figure-eight, that ridged black scar. Paul had seen, touched more of Rob's body more recently than anyone besides me. It was such a nice body.

Had been such a nice body.

Rob had said that if he ever decided to live, he'd close the open loop, complete the infinity sign.

Instead, his parents positively identified his corpse by that tattoo.

"I'll try," I say.

There was no try; I had no control over what my muscles needed. As Paul worked down my back, up my neck, into my shoulder blades, I started crying, then stopped, then started again. Paul's hands felt good, and the pain felt really good, and being touched at all made my whole body miss Rob. The massage went on a long time, Paul's fingers passing gently over the peeling, half-healed scab that ran down my wrist. I was grateful he said

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nothing, the self-injury laughably obvious. Bodies conceal our secrets. Those who see our naked bodies can then hurt us. But bodies are also our miracles. They feel even when the mind can't.

After the massage proper was over, Paul came around to the side of the table. He put one hand right below my lower back, holding up the base of my spine, and one hand under my neck, holding up my head. My skin grew warm, and I felt a powerful heat pour through me. It could have been the sheer relief at my body setting free even a fraction of what it had been carrying. It could be that the body has certain pressure points that cause a feeling of heat to occur, and Paul knew them. It could be that Paul was just really damn good. I thought, *This is bizarre*, and *Please stop*, and *Give that back*.

SKIN.

I have three tattoos, and I don't like them. The first is a large gothic tribal I got before Rob died, in order to hide a skin disease. I have vitiligo; I spent most of my childhood despising bathing suits and shorts, wearing pants in summer to hide the white patchwork that covered my legs and back. These patches have faded, reappeared, sprawled, gone pockmarked, and moved around over the years; if I'd tried to conceal all of them through their variable migrations, I'd be a circus-ready tattooed lady by now.

My second and third tattoos I got at the same time, a few months after Rob's death, against the advice of my therapist. I hated his tattoo when he was alive, thought the unfinished infinity symbol was tacky, expected. Nevermind I had a gothic tribal and no room to criticize. My oldest, best friend is a classicist and fell in love with a line from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*: *pathei mathos* in the Greek, or "learning through endurance," although an alternate translation is "learning through suffering." She planned to get it tattooed on her wrist; on a whim the night before I went in to get the infinity tattoo, I asked her to calligraph the Greek and fax the image to me.

These two tattoos, infinity and *pathei mathos*, were intended as a communal record—a whole pile of people had planned to all make appointments at the same tattoo parlor on the same day to get the same tattoo as a remembrance. In retrospect, this was a childish idea, and in the end, only myself and his former roommate went through with it. My clas-

sicist friend never did end up getting her wrist done. I don't blame her, or the other people who didn't show. Perhaps if he'd had a better tattoo.

I get grumpy when people ask me about the three black scrawls that trace down my spine (in order from the top: text, math, tribal) even though I know it's intended as a kindness, a getting-to-know-you gesture.

"What does your tattoo mean?"

My non-answer: "It's for a dead person."

ARMS.

Talking long distance, I ask Matt, the boy I'm dating now, what he remembers of his former lovers, and also what he forgets. He gives me a puzzled look, the computer screen we're speaking through pixelating his knitted eyebrows.

I give an example: that I remember the ways in which Rob couldn't be touched better than the ways he could. We had separate sheets because he was a wicked insomniac and couldn't sleep if our bodies touched. The bed I sleep in here in Chicago is dressed with the same sheets Rob and I slept under, high threadcount ones he gave me as a Christmas present and that I promptly stained with self-tanner and hair dye, vain creature I was and am.

Matt says, "I remember the way Anna cuddled up against me. She'd put her head under my chin, and I'd wrap myself around her, like this," his arms a bear hug that disappears off the edges of the monitor.

I remember so many explicit, pornographic tidbits of Rob. I have no idea how we used to hug.

HAND.

I'm from the Southwest and the one fear we Arizona kids grew up on was that Native American boogieman, the skinwalker. Don't whistle as you're walking by yourself at night or you'll call them to you. Of all the sundry nighttime terrors, the skinwalker reads best as what I did, what we do. Our memories wear us, and we wear them, brittle and transparent as onionskin. And yet this is also how my body keeps his, his touch imprinted on me, me living in him and him in me. When I walk back from the bar late at night, I don't sing. Sometimes I catch myself humming, go quiet, then startle at a tug on my shoulder.

When you turn back, there's no one there. □