

# After Form and Formlessness: Bodies, Boats, and Bathing

This is my body in the bathwater. The water it displaces is equal to the volume of my body. This is simple if continually impressive physics. Call this body a floater, a bobber, striped on and flush with the surface of the lake. Even while in the bath, in my mind I am always in the lake, that big flat, that massive freshwater body. The lake always covers up what it is we want to hide—old appliances, wrecked cars, sunken snowmobiles. Bodies as we see on the shore in *Twin Peaks* or in the river or the harbor in one of many *Law & Orders*, always floating in or coming up from somewhere. An opportunity for forensic scientists to perform their sexy science.

I might be obsessed with bathing, or if not bathing exactly, then the concept of the bath, of a body suspended (or mostly suspended) in liquid, preferably hot and scented. This might have something to do with weight: as you know, you seem to weigh less underwater. My brother and I, when we were kids, would stay in one of several favorite Best Westerns when we traveled between our Midwest (Upper Michigan) and my mother's family's Midwest (Northwestern Minnesota and eastern North Dakota). At least once a year our family would make the drive, stopping mostly in Duluth, Minnesota, or its twin city, Superior, Wisconsin—both old mining towns, built around the ideas of tunneling and excavation, just on the edge of the Iron Range.

Thus, my brother and I would mostly want the swimming pools, and preferably (for me) hot tubs. We would practice our poor-and-always-from-TV karate underwater, which slowed things down (drugged or drowsy Chuck Norrises) so we could stage a battle. It was easy to flip him, since he was younger and smaller. And underwater, the body is more buoyant. It has to do with the floatability of the body. The air trapped in the lungs. All those capillaries, caverns, inner spaces.

Not all people can float, judging from several friends I've had who claimed not to be able to, on their backs or on their stomachs, a la dead man's float. I have always loved floating. This is perhaps due to growing up around and in the water—whether in Minnesota, the land of so many minor lakes, or in Michigan, surrounded by the big ones: Superior, Michigan, Erie.

Weight is a concern. Not like it is for bulimics or anorexics, but it's always been with me. Both the physical idea of it (weight as apparent to

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us, as mass times acceleration due to gravity) and the life of it—a continual concern for a massive number of Americans. I don't mean this in a stupid way, *i.e.* poor me, media models of the body, and your mama so fat etc., but just as a concern I carry with me (think more Tim O'Brien, think more of me when I was ten and *busky*—the term makers of clothes for fat kids prefer—rounding the bases for what should have been an inside-the-park home run, but only making it to third and wheezing). Maybe this is more the slowness than the weight, but one connotes the other, as we know. This at least in the presence of gravity and air resistance. In a vacuum, whether fat or thin, we'd all wheel equally through the emptiness.

Back to the bath. I can count on both hands the number of showers I have taken in the last two years. Possibly on one hand, not including showers at the gym or while traveling (the quality of hotel bathtubs varies greatly, and this must be taken into consideration when booking rooms, though the potential of the public hot tub or, better, Jacuzzi suite, can make up for it). I just like the bath: the suspension & the heat. When I was eight or nine, I would sit inside the bathroom at our farmhouse in front of the heat fan for hours, just letting it blow on my back. It was cold outside, seemingly all the time, and this was my tiny rendition of Spring, my own personal Arizona.

In the last few years, I've become a homeowner for the first time, which is no small excitement or difficulty. The bath was a make-or-break point on several of the houses my wife and I looked at. Of course I wanted one of those claw-foot standalone tubs, or else a modern jetted tub, if not a stand-alone Jacuzzi (*Jacuzzi* is of course a brand, which gets its name from the seven Jacuzzi brothers, who came from Italy to the United States in the early 1900s, eventually creating jetted baths for hydrotherapy—so technically *Jacuzzi* is an *eponym* if you're interested in the linguistics), though my wife felt that those did not connote the classy life. We turned down several lovely houses that had too-small or too-sad tubs, and the house we ended up with is something of a compromise, but the bathtub is quite good. The hot water heater fills it well, time after time, not having to stop to refresh itself.

My love for the bath is part of me: its essential slowness, if not its technology and terminology (all the aromatics—mineral salts, bath salts, bath balms, rinses, body washes, loofahs, exfoliating scrubs—the province of The Body Shops that infest the malls that punctuate the suburbs all across this land, and the occasional visits to Lush, Sephora, those more bourgeois shops) has invaded my life. I otherwise tend towards busy-ness (if not to say *business*, the realm of those with their MBAs and the perpetual desire for speed and cash, the better life, entertainment and constant upward mobility), and the bath allows a minor respite. I also love the lightness of the body in the water (so near to weightlessness—that Space Age child-

hood dream, especially for us once-husky kiddies, bound forever for Big & Tall catalogs; perhaps the fat have always loved their baths, a theory I have not explored at all but set down here as a sort of random salvo against the vacuum, the margin, the death of the end of the page) and the water it displaces. Again, that simple physics, that trade-off, that motion.

Really, at least part of the loveliness is in the properties of water itself. If I had gone the engineering route in school, I would probably have been very interested in fluid mechanics, flow control, and all the serious calculus that it entails—the mathematics of that sort of physics has always interested me (even if it is always just beyond my grasp), the idea of the predictability of water, the complexity of such a seemingly simple and basic substance. Drink eight cups a day for health, my wife tells me. I try to do this. I try this and I fail: drinking plain water's dull. Give me carbonation. Give me flavor, caffeine, chemical additions.

I can name many instances of my life involving water, as I'm sure most people can. The slip-and-slide. Running through the sprinkler. Carwashes. Days down at the beach (whether fondly remembered for the sand and the shells and the heat, or poorly, for the massive sunburn and physical awkwardness in your suit among all the beautiful people). Water parks (in the Midwest, this mostly means the Wisconsin Dells). Water balloons. Squirr guns. Jetskis, waterskis, piloting cigarette boats at high velocities in my Miami Vice dreams. Playing in the viaducts underneath Highway 41 in all the runoff that leads down to the semi-poisoned lake (all the leftovers from a century of processing iron ore dumped into the water). Running hard into the fact of the rain.

This fluid is a fact of life on this planet. It is the ultimate enabler—amino acid blah blah catalyst for life. But look at the loveliness of its form when frozen in cubes, blocks, icicles, glaciers even as they scoured, left eskers in, the earth. Or consider it as steam—again in motion—whether coming off the sauna stones (the Finnish word for this is *loily*, steam that comes from stones) or off the body. Or the sight of exhaled breath fresh from inside when introduced into winter. The form of it—so flexible. Powerful. An ultimate formlessness—it takes on borrowed shapes. It fills up basins, pitchers, pools and water towers, everything. Buries it. Water as both (re)birthing and scourge of the earth (see also flooding, see Noah, see all manner of creation stories in world religion .

Of course water—or its lack thereof—lays a major part in human development. *See* Roman aqueducts. *See also* acid rain. *See* Las Vegas and its preposterous economy. *See also* water shortages in California. *See* crackpot schemes to tow an iceberg down from Greenland to use for water. *See* concern in the Great Lakes states about selling off too much of their water to the arid West. *See also* the increasing corporatization of modern agriculture and its need for ever more and more water.

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The other excellence about the bath is the plunge into it, the pleasures of the first immersion. I use this language when I think about how good literature acts on me (literature as a force that acts on the body). The pleasure of moving from the sauna (*see also* water in vapor form) to the icy lake (or to the snowbank, *see* solid water) if you are serious about extremity of sensation, as the Scandinavians are.

But this isn't (just) an essay about water. Any essay about water must be an essay about form. My obsession with it (form, and also water). I know there is a connection here: solid displaces liquid, form displaces form. I am trying to push this into an essay about form and formlessness, about both container and contained. Does language have a form, and what is its container? Is this only marks on white? Is this only displaced, vibrating air on its way to your ear? I am using my hands to mold it as we move further in. Think *meander*, the natural way that rivers avoid flowing straight (they'd rather swing back and forth, nearly parabolic, in the shape of snake trails across the sand—and there is important science that can be deployed to support this claim if necessary).



The heaviest physical form in my house (I know this as a result of recently having moved, the experience that a friend calls “continually humiliating” in the appraisal of all one’s possessions, their uselessness and wonder, and finally, their sheer mass and volume. A fourteen foot truck? Or should we go seventeen? Or twenty-four? Or give it all up to one of the moving companies, and abdicate our responsibility in every way for relocating the detritus of our lives?) is an old school library card catalog, formerly from Western Michigan University’s library (so says the plate that adorns it like a brand). It is physically imposing. I estimate that it weighs between four- and five-hundred pounds. It is a mass. A beast. A wall. A monolith. My wife and I bought the beast at Salvation Army (she being an ex-and-maybe-future-reference librarian, it seemed an obvious choice for our decor) and hauled it home. Most libraries, as you know if you’ve been into one in the last ten years, no longer use them, having gone instead to electronic catalogs, which are in fact more useful. Quicker. Easier. Less expensive to maintain (I’m not sure of this exactly, but one can imagine, and the electronic catalog is indeed more elegant and quick). Even if you lose the peripheral vision that the card catalog gave you (the pleasure and sometimes utility of *nextness*, of finding the book before or after the listing of the one you were looking for, the arbitrary wonders of alphabetical order and juxtaposition), it’s certainly more convenient being able to do things from afar, and simultaneously with hundreds of others, if necessary.

Maintenance is much easier, and I'd imagine these are more difficult to sabotage (I knew a guy who'd rip out the card for the book he wanted—fuck the scrap of cut-up paper and the tiny pencil stub).

Still, the behemoth is capable of crushing me (I think of the warnings against tipping vending machines). What are we using it for? This is what my three colleagues who helped us (barely) move it asked. Not sure yet, we answered. This is what everyone wants to know about it. We just wanted it. How could you not? It served libraries so well for so long (a nineteenth-century invention, with its roots in the 1791 French Cataloguing Code, it is suddenly a relic), it seemed an essential item to have. Technically, we only own one portion of the catalog—a good chunk of the Ps through Q, R, and most of the Ss, excepting the tail end. Which is probably enough to give a sampling of the rigid alphabetical order, its organizational structure, without overwhelming. It runs from *Partisan* through *Social Science*, stopping off at the following places (both strange and arbitrary—a sort of weird little passion play) on the way: *Personality*, *Play*, *Plot*, *Poesies*, *Poetry of*, *Population M*, *Postwar*, *Power of*, *Practical O*, *Pray*, *Prehistoric*, *Primacy*, *Principal*, *Principles of I*, *Prior*, *Probability*, *Problems*, *Proceedings of*, *Process*, *Program*, *Propaganda*, *Providence*, *Psychopath*, *Public I*, *Quar* (a good Scrabble word, one thinks), *Raft*, *Randolph*—this is the kind of excellent juxtaposition that alphabetical order offers up to us, *Rational*, *Readers*, *Readings in*, *Recherche*, *Red R*, *Reflective*, *Relique*, *Resources*, *Royal*, *Russian*, *Russians*, *Sadtler*, *Saints*, *Sammlung*, *Sane*, *Savage*, *Schedule*, *Schriften*, *Scientific*, *Scottish*, *Search*, *Second Hand*, *Secrets*—perhaps my favorite drawer of them all (such great potential here), *Series*—the self-referentiality of this one makes for much pleasure, *Shah*, *Shaking*, *Sheriff*, *Sketches*, *So*, *Social Class*, and *Social Life*.

This is what I love about it most: the arbitrariness, the strong presence of the form, this force of juxtaposition, produces a sort of poetry out of the alphabetical ether. Empty, it exudes a sense of possibility, of fiery potential. If not for storage, then for imposing order on our otherwise disorganized house, our otherwise disorganized lives. It is a reminder of another, much more rigid, time.

The body (odd to call it a body; a body of knowledge? a vessel?)—aside from its weight—is rigid and very heavy. Oak or something. What it contains—the order—is also rigid (though different languages and localities have minor variations, alphabetical order is pretty straightforward, at least on the face of it). Its strictness creates a sense of comfort, at least for me, that I know where everything will fall, where it can be found. It provides a wall, a box, a shadow to push against.

It contains, it has compartments—it forces you to classify, to file away by arbitrary order. The order is important, because only through order does it—the monolith of the catalog, of language itself—achieve a usefulness.

Order, structure, makes it *mean*. The alphabet and the rules of syntax are perfect by definition; they are axiomatic. They are important. They're what the writer has to guide her, a grain, a current, she should—she has to—work within and against.

In fact, though, alphabetical order isn't always as obvious as we think—for instance, in phone books, do we alphabetize A-1 Roofing before all the other As (thinking the 1 as a digit and hence preceding the letters) or as *A-one* (thus placing it under "o" within the As)? (The British Standard of Indexing rule is to spell them out.) But what do we do with *100 Best Stories*? It seems more logical to file it under *h* for *hundred* than *o* for *one*. Do we alphabetize St. Germain as "S-T" or "Saint," its logical expansion? And what about international names/languages? According to an essay, "Alphabetical Arrangement" by G. Norman Knight (published in the book he edited, *Training in Indexing*, MIT Press, 1969): "It is not absolutely essential for an index to be arranged alphabetically. For instance, in a list of tools in use in a given factory, it may be more convenient to have them arranged, not by a description of each tool, but numerically according to the tools' factory numbers...it is possible, even in an alphabetical index, to have some parts arranged nonalphabetically."

This is on the surface counterintuitive, but if the goal of the index, of the card catalog, is utility, then we should break whatever rules we need to make the thing more useful (without losing the comfort of the structure and its general rules, its methods and its ways of meaning).

Back to our story. My lovely card catalog's alphabetical order isn't as obvious as I thought, either. When we bought it, we had to remove the drawers in order to move it—again, barely; don't forget the physicality, the sheer impression of the form—and I finally got around to alphabetizing the drawers (after some debate whether to keep the headings on the drawers at all or use them for something else entirely). I got it done at last, left to right, top to bottom:

A	B	C	D	
E	F	G	H	etc.

as one would expect. As we (Westerners) write, as the page moves us. Certainly not boustrophedon (as ancient Greeks, like plows moving back-and-forth across a field:

A	B	C	D	
H	G	F	E	
I	J	K	L	etc.)

and not right-to-left as in Arabic. On completion, though, my reference librarian told me that card catalogs are always ordered top-to-bottom, left-to-right:

A	D	G	J
B	E	H	K
C	F	I	L

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divider (on which one might rest one's hands while copying down a call number)

M	P	S	V
N	Q	T	W
O	R	U	X

etc. This is because

of ergonomic consideration: index cards are wider than they are tall, hence it's more logical (it's better design) to—referring to my diagram above—pull out two consecutive drawers, C and D, for instance, when they are reasonably close together (arm-length), rather than pulling out D and E in my initial diagram, much farther apart). Of course boustrophedon would have worked well here too, but might have been even more confusing to the masses unfamiliar with the subtleties of ancient Greek.

This was strange to me, not only because of the violation of the near-universal organization of the Western page, but because I didn't remember this card catalog organization method at all. I have used many in my life, before they were rendered obsolete, but you'd think the form, its simple rules, would have been imprinted in me more effectively or permanently. And in this case, it's odd to find myself concerned with a technology of indexing, an old order, when it is in fact indexing nothing. The card catalog is empty. The terms are only pointers to ghosts. We don't have the library's collection, nor do we have the actual cards with the call numbers and subject guides. But I guess there is a beauty to the structure, the empty vessel (I am speaking both of the wooden shell as well as the order it implies) simply, in itself, to what the form *stands for*. When the lights are out, the plastic sheaths that cover the subject headings reflect little bits of light from passing cars; they look like building windows with the lights left on all night because it's cheaper in terms of lightbulb life to leave them on than to turn them off and then back on.

This is a defunct technology, like so many gone before it. Herman Hollerith, the inventor of the punch card, used the cards originally to help tabulate the 1890 census and used for about a solid century, most obviously in the old huge room-filling mainframe computers as a method of getting programming instructions into the machine. The technology is of course hugely outdated (though there are still a few residual machines that use them—certainly some hotel door locks (ExtendedStayAmerica still uses a form of this) and most famously voting machines and the 2000 return

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to the language of the punch card, the hanging chads, etc.—and they still carry on as part of our cultural language and memory: *e.g.* “do not bend, spindle, or mutilate,” though I’m sure this too will eventually pass out of memory like dead light from distant stars). Steven Lubar of the Smithsonian Institution has written a nice cultural history of the punch card (this can be found online through Google—the technology of the extending moment—easily enough). The punch card—I have a stack of these, found at a sale at Michigan Technological University, when I was younger—is very pleasing in its antiquity and in the forward-thinking-ness of the technology (think the 1960s conception of space and the future—all this great and steely optimism). The punch card is a form that still carries some minor information (for those who know how to read it, certainly), but also describes an emptiness—another index to another set of ghosts. It is a ghost now of a higher order.



The other stream that leads into my love of bathing is the Finnish tradition of the sauna (pronounced *sow-na*, the pig, not *saw-na*, the tool, by the Finns, meaning mostly my Finns, meaning those who emigrated from Finland to Michigan’s Upper Peninsula in the nineteenth century, meaning those in my parents’ town of Hancock, where many speak both languages). My parents have a sauna in both their cabin on the lake (Superior, of course: why settle for less?) and in the basement of their house. Nearly all my relatives had saunas when I grew up. They were places of refuge from the cold weather, arguably useful in healing and wellness, as well as bastions of a creepy sort (I thought at the time) of unfortunate family nakedness. As of 1997, there were nearly as many saunas in Finland as cars. The sauna—and I mean the traditional sauna when I say this, though I can’t think of many real innovations in sauna technology that have caught on—is an exercise in tradition, in the old form. The proper sauna still heats rocks taken from Lake Superior—very old forms, these stones, indeed.



This is the stream that runs behind the farmhouse in which I grew up. Brook trout are found in streams like this, as are various types of occasional perch, water striders, and many bits of the old wrecks (the barn, abandoned cars, wooden doors and other hardware deposited randomly into water and then forgotten). In other parts of the country, you might hear about bodies being found in streams like this. Technically, it is a creek or crick. It is on no map. In the summer it barely creeps by the beds of forget-me-

nots in the backyard. In the winter it is hidden beneath the ice, but you can still see it moving (a form and yet not a form—or one form of the same material beneath another). In the spring it is all rush and blitz and foam and goodness. When I was a kid, I was fascinated with it—both in its meandering from the source down to where it emptied into Portage Lake, just off our property. I liked it for the usual reasons—fish, bugs, dams, fun: all good one-syllable words important to boys like me. Now I think of it in terms of terms like form and motion, both its form as I remember it (doubtlessly different from the actual, though the actual form also interested me, and I do remember my annoyance at it not showing up on any maps—those indexes to the geology and topology of things) and the motion out from my childhood to my memory, to my memory of its form (and the way in which the crick formed me). I don't like living away from water, even now. I'm not desperate for it, but the couple years I spent in Iowa felt strange to me—no natural lakes within a hundred miles; only a reservoir close to Des Moines, that felt so utterly *forced*, so false. This is what happens when we try to create a lake out of nothing. I have an attachment to the form of the crick, if only because I grew up around one. Imagine that this is how those literally raised on the water—on schooners, sailboats, or houseboats—must feel.

My memories offer up form from formlessness—certainly they are more a mass, morass of things than a toybox of specific childhood forms. They find their way into my writing. Is this a Bad Thing, I think, and do not know. I do not want to be a slave to my obsessions. In indexing my first book, *Other Electricities* (which was quite a pleasure in itself), my obsessions, the things I constantly worried against, became too obvious: *weather, snow, blood, brother, barn, murder, father, and radio*, among them. Interestingly not much about the crick, but there was much about the lake. I thought about doing a concordance (and in a way, the index is—by default—a sort of concordance of ideas and characters) of the book just to see. (You can see an expanded, speculative version of the *Other Electricities* index, “Index for X and the Origin of Fires,” earlier in this book.) An index can be useful in defusing or at least addressing one's own writerly tics, too. Are other writers different—less fixated, less focused, less stuck—than this? I don't know. I hope so.



Our first and last form, the form of *the body* (*see also* corpse, *see* whatever's left) is an interesting one. When someone's killed, you used to see those tape marks left behind in the shape of the body, a marker or an index to where the body last came to rest. An outline of a ghost. (Maybe this is

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an outdated technology, replaced by digital cameras and computer-aided drafting, because they don't show it on *CSI* or *Law and Order*.) I came to the body late. I came to crime fiction late. I came to mystery stories late. But I came nevertheless. There is always a body. There is usually a woman. There is something to be uncovered. Bodies are found in lakes, under long winter snow, walled up in houses like dead cats, and certainly on television, which is obsessed with bodies. The media, obsessed with bodies (both alive and dead). Look, there's Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen, at least one of whom is almost disappearing in the light! Look: there are the hot twins! So says the male world's creepy erotic fascination with them. The only thing better than a body is *two bodies* that are pretty much the same (one imagines). And the only thing better than sexy twin bodies are dead twin bodies—still glamorous and desirable but now gone so far remote, now the object of a different sort of fascination.



This is my mother's body, a topic I do not often write about but always write around. It is like a white taped-off form on the floor of my mind, if my mind can be said to have a floor. It is photographed and filed way back there.



A recurring theme in my imagination, and certainly in my literary imagination, is armlessness, amputation: the attenuation of the body due to accident or illness, or the defects caused by birth. Put simply, there is something fascinating about armlessness. There's a great passage in Dickey's *Deliverance* about the options for accidents on the rural farm. Armlessness is not purely rural, but certainly the varieties of farm machinery offer up ways for the inattentive to lose their digits, hands, or feet, or limbs entirely. (Of course there's plenty of this action to go around, as seen in the slaughterhouses, as seen on the assembly lines of my dear Michigan's automotive industry—this is hardly the province of the provincial.) Still, when I lived in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, I felt surrounded by armlessness. There were so many missing limbs. I made midnight ventures to the frenzied zombies who work at Super Wal-Mart there (an ex-girlfriend was even flashed at 2 a.m. in the parking lot while I was getting the car, a shocking experience which I didn't even get to witness first-hand. Who would think that the sudden exposure of the body to another body would be so shocking and invasive? But it is). It was impossible to get out of the store without

a half-hour wait in the checkout line due to inattention or idiocy or just plain Southern slowness. My favorite all-time checker was a one-armed woman. She was as efficient as the cool machine of mathematics, especially considering her amputated limb. And I write this with a full sympathy for Wal-Mart employees, having worked as a checker and then in the electronics department (along with a very serious Michigan-Militia type guy—the whole shebang: black helicopters, assassination plots, and everything—who shortly thereafter became the manager of the Cosmetics section and stopped bothering me) in the store #2192 (Houghton, Michigan, whoop whoop whoop, or so our cheer—we did in fact have to do the Wal-Mart cheer upon opening, a peculiar ritual indeed, all our bodies lined up and shouting—went) for some time after high school. As a checker, I worked towards efficiency (we were rated by our quickness and our errors, even having a rating and a top ten checkers list, which I never made; how did those ladies—and they *were* mostly ladies—do it?). And this is what the checkers do: they drag the forms across the grated form of the laser scanner. This rings up the prices and adds them all together, inscribes them on a form which is torn off and given to the customer. Then we—Tetris-style—fit them in bags in the most efficient way. It is always worth doing a job efficiently. It is, as we say, good form.



This is the body of my armless brother, a fictional character who appears in a bunch of my work, often on the periphery, and sometimes more centrally. I don't know where this comes from, actually, considering I don't have any amputations in my immediate (or extended) family. I don't suffer from amputee identity disorder. "Individuals with this condition" (which is currently trying to make its way into the *DSM-V* like so many other aspiring conditions) according to Dr. Michael B. First (a psychiatrist involved in Biometrics research) "have a preoccupying desire to become an amputee. This desire is so strong that a number of individuals have attempted self-amputation and a couple have successfully arranged to have a surgeon conduct a voluntary amputation of a healthy limb in order to 'cure' their condition. Individuals with this condition feel that their true core identity is as an amputee. The surgery serves to match their anatomical configuration with their true selves, thus eliminating the conflict that plagues their lives."

I am fascinated with this condition—the desire to trim off a limb, a much more invasive body modification project (I could never find my way to getting a piercing, or even a tattoo—partially since I couldn't think of anything that wouldn't seem stupid later). Doing this is the ultimate

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display of bodily control. A friend told me about this guy who works at Jimmy John's, a sub chain, in Grand Rapids, who has the whole great lakes tattooed on his back. That is good use of the body's form. I could see getting that tattoo done.

Still, the idea of armlessness—or that brand of helplessness that it signifies to me, at least literarily (though I don't want to glorify or romanticize it, nor does armlessness equal helplessness...obviously)—is massively appealing. It's grotesque (think Flannery O'Connor, think Freakshow, think *Geek Love*) and disconcerting in a real and non-dull way. I don't know exactly what it means to me, in my work or in my dreams, but the violation of the body's form (a form which I don't hold as high as some—some human bodies are beautiful, but I don't hold them all as sacred, nor do those suffering from amputee identity disorder) is something that ties in here—a physical innovation if nothing else. The operation of force, of sometimes massive trauma, when applied to the body, the original form. It is something new and disconcerting, something exterior to ourselves and near-inevitable, a sort of warning, that gives me pause.

Is armlessness related to formlessness, and if so, how so? Explain.

I haven't had to explain my fictional brother's armlessness to my actual brother yet, as he hasn't asked me about this portion of the book. Does he feel an itch in his phantom arm at night, I wonder, this fictional arm laying on the floor of the story. This is the problem of writing and the family. Not a new one, I know, but still a problem, nevertheless. There is certainly a slim scrim separating the faux-brother from the real brother, and a couple arms there to boot. Arm and form are a nice slant rhyme. This is one connection. I know that there are others. Armlessness is a lack of control, a lack of ability to shape things with one's hands.

I thought I might lose my arm three years ago, when I lived in Alabama without medical insurance, and I found the lump on my left arm (right around the bicep) slowly increasing in size. It went from the size of a seed to a pea to an eye. At this point, I had it surgically removed. It turned out to be benign, but while I waited for the biopsy results, it was a possibility that crossed my mind, a gruesome irony, that I might soon find out what it actually meant to be armless after writing about it. There is the word *cancer*, the nameless, formless killer, which my mother had. *Cancer* provokes a dread in me that has no form, though it has a root in my genetics, in my mother's final story. It is maybe the single most modern way to die, and I thought that it might be meant for me. (It may still be meant for me, though not quite yet.)



This is the body of water that means the most to me: *Superior*. (Odd to think of that construction at all, of *water as body*.) This is the body that my father's father used to ferry loads across. He was captain of, among others, the boats *Straits of Mackinac*, 1928, capacity of 56 vehicles, and the *City of Petoskey*, 1940, capacity of 105 vehicles—huge bodies in themselves. We call them (boats, cars) *sbe*. We think about them in their capacity to bear loads. His body and my grandmother's body brought my father into the world in 1945, twelve years before the erection of the Mackinac Bridge.

My grandfather's body is a body I never grew to know (he died before I was born). All these bodies—these forms—are laid down in the past. They lie beneath me like those dead in the mines. Those whose bodies were never recovered. Those who died in the construction of the Mackinac Bridge (who fell a thousand feet into wet concrete, or suffered other awful fates in the name of civic or financial progress, innovation), the bridge that put my father's father out of business. I don't know what he did after it (itself a massive—and certainly impressive form) was erected, opening to traffic on November 1, 1957, making the ferry boat, his technology, his livelihood, outdated, obsolete.

The body of *Superior* holds many of the wrecks of boats—some sunk intentionally as wrecks designed for divers, some sunk in bad weather, without intention. I think Adrienne Rich. I think of my father's father. I think of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

I love the water's ability to cover over, the ability of its skin (odd to think of it as *skin* but I do, thinking always body, thinking always the rinds of ice that lay atop it much of the year) to immediately distribute the force of impact and submersion over the whole surface, to cease its ripple and register the entry no more. It swallows up. It consumes and covers over. It barely registers our presence. There are things bigger than us.

There are so many bodies.

They pile up and are compiled.

They are in the soil. They will eventually become oil or coal if compressed enough. If we think about them enough, their forms are somehow with us, hovering in memory around us.



I admire those who can control their bodies, control the inflation or deflation of their form. Reading about actors gaining or losing 60 pounds for a role, I find this nearly unbelievable. (My brother is good at this—his ken for control probably; at times he is obsessive when he works out, at

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least that is when he has the time in his life to do it, fluctuating forty pounds down or up; he quit smoking several years ago after years of it, years of smoking while chewing tobacco while wearing the patch. This is a serious craving for nicotine we're talking about, but one day he just quit completely, impressing me—I can't quit anything once I've started it.) Probably this all is because I enjoy food. A certain amount of gluttony goes down well with me. It might be a lack of self-control, or an enjoyment of muchness. I like what the world has to offer my belly. Even more than food, I like—am perhaps obsessed with—beverages. Maybe this is an oral fixation. Or a continuation of my interest in flow control, in fluid dynamics, in water. But I like nearly any beverage. My caloric intake consists of more beverages than nutritionists would likely recommend. Alcoholic or not—there is a pleasure in the sip, the gulp, the effervescence, the color in the glass. I require both juice and coffee in the morning, Coke or Diet Coke (sometimes Fresca) throughout the day. Possibly substitute mineral water, which those on the east coast call *seltzer*.



This is my body, allegedly 70% water, in the bath, displacing water equal to my mass. For someone who as interested in water as I evidently am, I don't like drinking it much, at least water unmodified by carbonation, or sugar, hops, aspartame, or Splenda. I can't bear to drink straight water with a meal. Of course I drink it after exercise, and reasonably otherwise throughout the day, but this is more out of obligation and an awareness of necessity than enjoyment.

These are the teeth part of my body. As you know, I am concerned about the state of them. My teeth have been problems for years (see the "On Fragments" essay for more on this). They are ground down without my knowledge in the night. My cross-bite makes me a grotesque, a sort of aberration.

I had thought—until the Chick-Fil-A incident (see its earlier exploration in "Fragments")—that my teeth were a hard form, that they were nearly unstoppable, that they were bigger than God or the humongous fungus (a lichen, the biggest contiguous living organism on the planet, in Upper Michigan). Evidently they are not. The body—the first and most important form, the reason why amputation, body mutilation, birth defects, the tradition of the aberration, horrify and consume us, as it's genetically in us, I guess, to abhor the butchering of the form—eventually betrays us. This is one of many stories that comes with age.

It must also be in us to experiment with form, with the body, with what it does or can be made to do. It is in this way like language, like alphabetical

order, like my card catalog, like sex, like narrative, like physics—all these bodies stacked up on top of us like atmospheric pressure, bearing down on our every thought.

There are bodies—or ghosts, the forms of bodies without the content, signs for people and things that have evaporated years before—behind us and surrounding us. They wait for our inevitable decay and erosion down to water, finally away from form. I stand in crowds at night waiting for the ball to drop to signify the coming of one more new year. There will soon be toasts and toasts and cheers. Many beverages to drink, to pass through the mouth, the gateway to the body. There is that body in the water, washing slowly up to shore. It is waiting for the television cameras to come upon it, to record its form on film, in bits, in everlasting light. Maybe this is as good an ending point as any. Think fear of death as fear of entropy, as the fear of a final decomposition, formlessness (or at least a final shift in form—we go from one to none, or one to many, depending on your thinking). Think that this is how the physical laws of the universe tell us it always works, that form requires a constant effort, a continual push against the wall, a finger in the dike, and thus by this push against the wall, this constant plugging of the hole, the swells, our shelter from the squall, we are shaped and we are finally—sort of—saved, if not loved.