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LIDIA YUKNAVITCH

A Pound of Flesh

Everything goes unsaid between them. Her stray thoughts. Her girlhood. She will not fail. She will offer only steel gray to blue eyes, twinning his. Her entire corpus will be reduced to a single a word, a word joining them across time and space, a word lengths beyond daughter: athlete. That is the silent agreement standing between them like a woman made of gold, silver, or bronze, poised, taut, caught before the dive.

This is how it is: each day before practice the girls are weighed. The coach stands at the door of the women's locker room, half inside, half not. The girls are ordered onto a scale like fruit, like something prized or priced. If a girl makes her weight, calculated by a complex system of flesh and fat and number equations, she is set free in water. If a girl does not make her weight, she is given licks. With a Styrofoam kickboard. Asked to bend over. The swap at the flesh hollow whacked against her. The sting at the upper leg. The reddening. One swap for every pound of fatted flesh.

He watches them in the water. Up the side of the pool. Down. Surely he has a wife. Children. Perhaps even children their age. But in the space of practice he hasn't even a name, let alone a life that is not this watching. And at the side of the pool, walking up and down next to their watery thrashing, their legs kicking, their arms spinning, he is ever present, he is like an unending eye whose gaze is never returned. Only the image of their motion comes.

Her teammate Seana Blazey has the ribs, the shoulder blades of a small bird. But her body is moving, her breasts and ass are rounding and rising like lush fruits. The coach is hardest on her, for her speed and her winning are remarkable. She wins every race, she leads every lane. It is as if she will never lose. He watches her more than any other girl. When he watches her at competitions, black stopwatch in the palm of his hand as if her whole life is there too, he seems as if he might explode with . . . something, she can never quite say. His face changes in that pure watching. It is as if there is nothing else in the universe but her body before him. And when she wins he looks seized, taken by some watery truth into glory.

When he weighs Seana Blazey a line of sweat forms on his upper lip. She is three pounds over nothing.

She is always next in line behind Seana Blazey. She will do anything to be next in line. Sometimes she can see the vertebrae in the back of Seana Blazey's neck clatter down when she is on the scale, her head drops the tiniest bit, her back goes slack like surrender.

When Seana Blazey walks from the locker room to the pool everyone watches the welts on the tops of her legs—red, more red than the heart thudding with each step. Seana Blazey, in addition to being the fastest among them, sleeps around. Drinks herself to near drowning each night. She is very close to falling away from the sport. She is very close to quitting. Still, she comes each practice. She does not make her weight. She doesn't. When it happens, no one dares look her in the eye. She slips into the water as if felled from flight.

Once and only once she had a conversation with her, when Seana Blazey slammed her head against a locker trying to catch her own drunken fall. Her eyes were closed the entire time.

"Are you O.K.? Can I get you anything?"

Nothing.

"You better hurry. Weighing in two minutes. He's coming. I can see him."

Nothing.

"I said, hurry up and get your suit on. He's—"

"Don fugging talk do me you pathetig idiod... I swear I'll fugging ssslap your ssstupid face..."

Seana Blazey somehow composes herself to step up, holds her breath, her head, everything up. Even though she is filled with disgust at Seana Blazey's behavior, she never forgets this, how courageous an act it was, how perfectly achieved.

Her turn always goes nearly unnoticed, since she follows Seana Blazey. Her weight is always precisely on the mark, whether or not anyone watches. She has made the idea into a race. She will never be beaten because she will always win. She will never be marked or stunned. There is nothing she will not do to maintain this bodily number. The number fills the front of her brain, overtaking language, or imagination, or any random synaptic clicking: 126. 126. 126. The number appears before her in tiny red marks on a black screen. The number is recorded. As she steps off of the scale her foot suspends

itself for a long second; for a long second she thinks she might faint or fall. No. She is stepping down, she is walking past the coach, the door, she is moving toward water with the lightness of air.

None of the swimmers ever talk about licks. After practice in the locker rooms the girls shower and their nakedness releases them back to an ordinary world where bodies move, simple.

It is not the licks that move her. It is the image of walking to the water marked like that, everyone watching, especially the coach, their eyes weighing down on a body like lead, her body sinking straight to the bottom of the world. She does not think she could make the walk from the scale to the pool. She thinks she would die at the second or third step. She thinks she would rather give up eating altogether, let the body eat itself as it grows, feed off of itself. She thinks she would rather cut off a slice of the thick meat at her buttocks and eat it there in front of him than read the red number rising.

She locates the fault line at her father. Making her eat and eat. His large hands on her newly swelling hips and thighs. He wants this delightful rounding flesh. To squeeze it and cup it in the palms of his hands. He wants her to sink into his hands. He brings her chocolates from Germany and cheese from France and whole milk from dairies in the Midwest. It is absurd how many presents of food he has brought to her, made her eat in front of him, smiling at her eating, sitting her on his lap. Her father the athlete turned salesman. Her father the breadless, her father not winning, her father whatever happens to athletes turned fathers.

Drastic measures had to be taken. At twelve eating her own hand, bringing the danger back up to expel. At thirteen and fourteen the horror of breasts, staring at her in the mirror like twin fists. At fifteen night running, three a.m. Every night. Every single night.

Among those who draw licks are the fat girls, the girls who are slow and whose arms puff out from their shoulders as if they are inflated. It is ironic to her that their body fat actually looks as if it will help them to float. They do not win races. They do not lead the lanes during practice. Sometimes they eat in the locker rooms directly after workout. She is repulsed by them but she cannot not look at them either. Their cheeks red and their hands plump and silly. They are the last to enter the pool since they are lazily avoiding some of the laps of warm-up. They are the last to exit the pool

since they are slow and lack the drive to push themselves, to burn, to bring their own bodies to the edge. The truth is that the licks they take don't much affect them, all that flesh slapping back at the little Styrofoam board like a big WHAT. Their legs barely marked at all. The up and down pulse of each cheek belligerently pounding as they walk from the scale to the pool. The coach uninterested in any way. Once she saw one of the girls laughing as she threw herself into the pool, a seal, a performer, looking for a red ball to nose to the surface.

But her disgust is more pure for Seana Blazey. It is this: Seana Blazey drinks and fucks and eats and wins. With abandon. Without discipline of any sort. The opposite of the word "athlete." It is probably true that if Seana Blazey quit, she would then become the fastest girl on the team.

Her father has never seen her win a race. He stands off to the side before the race, and they always make eye contact. Blue on blue. At some point during the race he leaves the building. Perhaps it is after the start, after she hangs suspended as an idea, then knives into the water. Perhaps it is after the first turn, when the competitors on either side of her are neck and neck. Perhaps it is when she begins to pull ahead, voices rising, the other swimmers realizing by body before mind that they cannot, will not catch her, her own body pulling away, speeding toward the cusp of longing. When with the last surge of all of her strength she drives her hand to the wall and her head breaks the surface and the gasping and realized winning and looking up and up he is gone, always gone, never watching. She is always left a head bobbing in a pool with no one watching.

They are both Geminis; twinning.

His father did the same thing. He tells her stories of the baseball games his father walked out of at the crucial moment. The arms bent and pulsing, the legs twisting in the dirt, the flex and release and connection, the sweet swell of muscle to swing. The lock wood knock of bat to ball, its tiny orb lifting dirty white toward light, all the eyes tracing its flight, the man suspended mid-swing, legs crossed, head thrown back, mouth open slightly. The home run. The father gone. Invisible. Like air being swatted out of a body.

She is cognizant of the wound she carries. She is not skilled at this game. She has not excelled in her training. She catches herself

longing for the voyeurism, longing for the man watching. She can't help it. Drooling underwater.

His face, during the blows, and even for a moment afterwards, is fatherly. That is, and always will be, the word for it. It is as if he has sucked up all the ways in which fathers fail their daughters, their own skin reaching, their own hearts giving out with pounding, that wanting, and let it loose in the sweeping motion. His face recording that vital concern to teach a lesson. To instruct. To bring the body home.

When they are climbing out of the pool, dripping and pumped like new animals, sometimes smirks or jokes or knowing nods are passed between the coach and the swimmers. Their wrestling has worked its way out through the burning of a workout. Each body leaves the water with a kind of ease, a relief, a letting go. It would not be odd to hear one of the girls saying, "find a pound now, I dare you," or to hear the coach responding, "don't give me any lip." Everyone smiling or laughing under the weight of it.

Once her father told the story of his last game as a high school student. Bases loaded at Our Lady of Little Flowers. Cleveland, Ohio, the gray of pavement and winter sealing like fate. Nuns and Fathers in black, black coats and boots and hats on the bodies of family members. The boys on the field as beautiful as boys on a field are; strange angels. Breath making fog from mouths. Eyes keened in on plays and moves and the edge of things. Top of the ninth. The board wearing its scores, though no one needs to look. At the moment sweat is forming at his upper lip, and just as his arms uncoil to connect thick whack and send the little world out of the park, at that moment all the nuns and all the fathers look up, like faith. Right then the end of things rings in the boy like hope. He sees college. He sees leaving home. He sees a chance at inhabiting the word athlete. His lungs jack-knife with something like joy. His arms surrender. His body shivers. A cheer rises up like a chorus. Everyone is a single voice. Except one. At that moment a man leaves. His back stopping the action.

In the telling, her father is smoking a cigarette. The cigarette smoke drifts between them like a dead heaven. He tells her the story over and over again to teach her a lesson. He tells her and tells her, and the story lingers in the air around her, in between his

coming and going and his life as a salesman, away from fathering, the story floats.

During this story she always holds her breath nearly to rupture. She knows she is lacking. She knows she has never suffered licks, and that it would only be through suffering licks that she would truly connect with this story, for a man without the love of his father is tragic in ways she will never know, how could she know. She knows like she knows the back of her hand that she would have to choose licks to get anywhere near the importance of this story between father and son, and the violence of an athlete's body, and the failure of a man's hope unrealized. She knows that her only hope is to breed herself into the girl standing before her in a line of girls making their bodies under the eyes of a man. Sometimes she stares so hard at Seana Blazey's back in front of her that she feels her own eyes shiver.

One day the swimmers arrive for practice and the bubble that covers the pool is damaged; they cannot practice that night. Inside of their skulls they are filled with shock and glee. After all, a night released from practice is a strange night of freedom, of rest, of relief. She is not filled with shock and glee. She feels as if she might cry. She feels as if she might faint. She feels as if she has no where to go, no place to stand, no water to hold her. Her face is red and her mind is racing, and before she can catch them the words shoot ahead of her out of her mouth, "Will we be weighing?" Everything stills. All of the other girls turn to look at her as if she has murdered something soft and white before them. It is preposterous, what she has asked, but his eyes are already collecting them up like little bobbers floating at the surface caught in a net, he is already telling them to line up, his voice is already at their backs. She takes her place behind Seana Blazey, who looks more emaciated than is humanly, womanly possible, and she feels a strange kind of excitement standing close enough to her to smell her skin in spite of the mood of the other girls. The skin of Seana Blazey smells like vodka. Seana Blazey's back and shoulder blades jut angular and cold as she steps up onto a scale that will eat her alive. One pound; the size of something a person could hold in their hand.

The licks come differently this time, there is no slow walk to the release of water. There is only all of their eyes. Shamed, the girls

look down. Seana walks back toward the locker room, her legs red stinging from stepping.

Her turn comes and goes. But she was dizzy already. The number immobile and beautiful replaces her mind, her skull, her whole head.

In the locker room Seana is dressing. She stands behind her. She can smell her shame. Then Seana's head comes over her shoulder to speak back at her. Seana Blazey looks her in the eye and says, "You fuck for brains. After this, I'm going to come after you. I'm going to beat the living shit out of you. I'm going to make your life a living hell." She stands there in a place where all of the air has been sucked out from around her body, like a vacuum, like the inside out of breathing. She stands there while the other girls dress and drift out. She stands there long enough to be the last one in the locker room, the last one to leave, long enough to see him waiting for Seana Blazey just outside. It is night. She keeps walking, aware that he is watching. She keeps walking even though his hand is on Seana Blazey's breast, ripe, gorgeous flesh-fruit, palmed.

He is no longer watching her as she begins her walk home, her mind blurring words like they are dipped in water, what is farther, home or father?