

Look at Yourself

When I was eight, I envied my friends whose sandals bore the impression of their feet: flipflops discarded by summer pools, shoe-beds shiny with the dip of big-toe, pinky, and the rest. A little miracle I thought it was—these belongings giving away and giving *way* to the bodies they belonged to. I remember my friend Izzy stamping her narrow soles onto the black foam of her Volcom thongs. My friends' bodies were reading their names onto the earth—*here I am*—and the earth was reading it back to them, *there you are*. I lingered at doorsteps to look, to listen; to catch the body's involuntary—inevitable, it seemed—signature, like a beachwalker turns to see the prints of an animal on the sand.

Most alluring was that none of my friends seemed to notice nor care. All this being, weighing, and shaping without the slightest surveillance or self-consciousness. It was like watching somebody being loved without asking for it; watching someone be beautiful, without her knowing it.

My sandals refused to do the same. No matter how I pressed my toes in the summer heat, my blue Reefs stayed buoyant as the day my mother bought them. *Here I am*, my strides sung.

No response. My sandals, I felt, were ignoring me. The problem could've been explained by a difference in footbed material, nothing more. But I thought *I* was the thing different, the problem—that maybe I didn't run right, or floated where others trod. I felt like Rhoda in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* when she says, "I have no face. Other people have faces...They laugh really; they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it." I began to wonder, with a little dread, if what other bodies did effortlessly, I might need to study and copy, through sheer force of desire.

I worried, most of all, that it was my desire for this aesthetic signature that forbade it from me. Like a love-struck teen whose glances at her crush make them shrink, walk the other way. A wantless girl with shoes in her shape—I wanted to be her.

When I was eleven, I started pulling out my hair. I don't remember the day I began. I only remember doing it all the time, the endless loop of it: the search, tug, the sting of release, and the examination. In the back seat of the family Volvo, or in the dim of the movie theater, I pulled one, then another. Some hairs were ended by a hard white ball, a pinhead of skin. These pinged bright when pulled. Others were encased by a thick, soft cocoon of translucent skin.

These looked like upside down cattails in the shore of my scalp; or like little feathers, fading from white to gray to black. These let go with an ache, and were my favorite, the ones I was after. When I'd find one, I'd twirl the end between the pads of my fingers, then use my finger nails, always too long, to shimmy the skin down, then off, before searching for another.

In a week, I'd made a touch-map of which parts of my scalp housed the most of these hair-types. Most promising were the upper left and right quadrant, not so much in the front and back. In my fifth grade school photo, you can see two little puffs of coarse hair on each side of my skull. The regrowth.

I was not addicted to the hair pulling itself, but to this little proof of attachment at each end. The skin validated something for me, said, *Look! You, your body, is right. Right*, as in, normal; but also right, as in, *Right here*. My hair did for me what my sandals never did.

Of course, by doing this, I was becoming someone strange. But I couldn't help it.

Catching my body in the act of attachment, witnessing its involuntary mechanics of holding onto itself, choreographed for the young me a fantasy—a fantasy of reliable connection, of being held onto without needing to hold on back.

At the stables where I rode as a child every week, some horses—usually the biggest ones—would come to the window and clamp their teeth on the bars of their stalls, bare down, arch their necks, and heave. The rush of oxygen gives them a short high, and so the cycle repeats—cribbing, it's called. Sometimes, when I walked to the tack room to rinse a school pony's bit, I would pass through a symphony of warmbloods and thoroughbreds heaving in unison. The addicts don't traipse off to hide their habit. No,

they do it in the open, in your face. They don't see you seeing them. They are alone with their pain.

A cribbing horse is suffering; she needs a bigger pasture, a different paddock, another companion. The heave says *I am not okay, do something!* But sometimes there is nothing to do. Sometimes, even after you relocate your horse in a sprawling field, with another herd, it will find the nearest fence, clamp, and inhale.

I let my hair fall in plain sight. Little tumbleweeds of dirty-blond gathered on the floor of my mother's car, in my bed. I didn't think of my actions, or my body, as something I needed to hide. I didn't think people could see me. At school I kept my hair out of my face, out of my line of sight, with an elastic headband—always some shade of blue or gray. When I was outside playing, I wondered what it would be like to be just an eye, giant and blue—a metonym of a girl who could see without being seen.

“She's pulling out her hair.” The doctor had barely touched my head when he announced it. The proof was there, in the little stubs that were sprouting back, stronger this time, darker this time.

It has a name, this condition. Other kids do it, but I didn't know them.

In the car-ride home, my mother explained it to me as a grounding compulsion—“To remind oneself that one is there..here,” she said, as I stared out the window, hands under my thighs. “It's called *rooting*,” she rephrased. “Like smelling one's fingers, or picking at one's skin.” The silence between us was solid, the air like amber, preserving this small, weird thing a daughter did, then didn't.

After the doctor's visit, I didn't pull my hair ever again. In a year, I would pluck my body from the earth instead—starve the soft parts, until there was almost nothing left—just to see, check, was anyone holding on? The answer was, unhesitatingly, *yes!* A symphony of care and concern, my mother's embrace. But I couldn't trust those answers. I felt the need to check, then check again. Always, I would use my own hands—gripping one thigh, then the other, measuring. A mirror's reflection meant nothing; my mother's affirmations, water on hot pavement. I wanted to be seen, but a part of me must have known—the point was to feel it, here, in my own hands; to know it, to answer it for myself.

In sixth grade, my crush stops me at the door before lunch. He's wearing rainbow flip-flops. "Wait, Martha, you don't know you're beautiful?"

I don't remember what prompted his question. In my memory, it feels unprompted.

He looks at my basketball shorted thighs, my loose t-shirt trying to conceal the breasts I'd wished for then wished gone.

"Look at yourself!" He says it again, a little angry this time, as if we're siblings not peers, and he's fed up. A brother trying to save his sister from what's coming.

He is the most popular boy in our class. The fastest on the track. There is no way he likes me. What is he doing?

I grab for the shoulders of the plastic chair behind me, inhale, heave. Through the open window, I hear our classmates outside, clamoring for pizza and monkey bars. The room is empty except for us. Quiet except for his words.

"You are so beautiful," he repeats.

It's the kind of thing a girl dreams about—a lie her unconscious sends her when she needs it; a fiction that she can feel, inside, as truth.

When he repeats himself, I don't feel like I can take it literally. I am silent. "Martha, look at yourself!" His words press into me one more time.

He is asking me to do something. *Look at yourself.* He is begging me to feel it. *You are. Right. Here.*

But all I feel is what he's doing to me. I cannot stop looking at him looking at me. All I want is to disappear, watch this miracle happen to me, over and over again, from some other place—some place not here.

When I leave, I cup my crush's words inside me and walk slowly down the stairs to the green. They will run out, spill, but not yet. Right now I feel anointed. As I approach the lunchline, I think, *Maybe they'll see it.* When my sister spots me from the picnic table, I imagine her sighing with relief. All day I pretend I'm someone who knows, someone who doesn't need to ask.