

Soma: Body Poems

by

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Abstract

Soma is chapbook-sized collection of lyric poems that explores themes of bodies, sexual and gender-based violence, metaphor, girlhood, materiality, posthumanist feminism, and the natural world. Through three overlapping poetic modes, referred to as a triple-stranded DNA helix, *Soma's* figurative, material, and anatomical imagery comes together to create a portrait of a femme body, in pain yet healing. *Soma's* figurative objectification, abstraction, and poetic anatomical analysis of the body offers a posthuman, new materialist, and ecofeminist lens through which other traumatized bodies may (re)situate themselves within the natural world. More importantly though, *Soma* is a reclamation of trauma, the traumatized body, and self-love. Following the short collection of personal poems is a critical analysis of *Soma* and a sources section which both offer context for the collection as well as insight into the author's creative process and the secondary texts used in the creation of the collection.

For June,

you're not yet born, but let the world be gentle to you, my girl

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SOMA

PLASMA

Looking at myself

I am a wound
skin split, parting,
exposing the lush red
flesh, blood
horrific and inviting
I am a wound

I am cutting
through the earth
as an aorta,
a slate river
I am peeling
lips a gash
on a tree
sap in amber orbs
weeping

down bark
honey
on the side
of a broken
buff stone pot
nose and eyes
running wild
as sheet lightning
breaks the night
into pieces

I am fraying
yawning
cracked pavement
soft dandelions
bursting through
splayed toes
I am tearing
down the middle
of the highway
heart outside
my supine body
on the operating table

I am a wound
I am in the bathroom
sitting on blue linoleum
holding on
to a cheap plastic mirror
between my open legs
looking at myself

Bliss

Feel blood pumping
through your heart in great quakes,
skin glowing from the hot bath.
Your body a cushion of interiors
to fall back into.
In cupped hands,
flowing through
cupped hands.
Feel the lift
of the single sorrowful soprano
in your headphones,
a joint curdling in the ashtray on your chest.
Her liquid voice growing and overtaking
the crescendoing symphonetta, and your body,

your still body, somersaulting
within the viscous caverns of your inner ears.

Bows on strings sawing air
tugging you
back and forth.

You, handing your life over
to this feeling.

When you imagine a cloud,
imagine this instead.

Here the stars bleed in thousands

We slough off our city
skin plump and fleshy
crawl across
the desert sand
 raw sugar
in black coffee
you should have seen
the way
we wrung out
our hand
washed undies
 vaginas
smelling of floral soap
chemical bouquets
rose petals
ground to paste
in a mortar
you should have heard
us yip and
howl
like coyotes
as the stars hemorrhaged
over us

Hedonism

You want
fingers sinking
into velvet

wildflower honey,
cherry blossom
rain, bergamot and

jojoba oiled skin
in the morning, burning

patchouli, broken
rosemary, blood
like red jasmine wax,

making love
on the leather couch
to Leonard Cohen

like a couplet
lying on a page.

Apricot stones and almond eyes

Extra colours in your blonde hair, you flit
from car to car across the ferry deck.

You are the bluest blue, a loose petal
tempting tonight's breath.

I often wonder who I am
when I'm not dying.

The wind lays down - a shudder
a long, long pause followed by flight.

In my hands I hold July, our old sweetness
abandoned like cherry pits.

Pavlova clouds licked in lilac,
imprints on closed eyelids.

Love, the sea glass waits -
who will collect it when we're gone?

Cottonwood Beach, Fort Saint James, June 2015

The mountains disappear
into ivory, oil paint clouds,
hard peaked, upon a blue canvas.
the lake a place to dip
legs and brushes. I lie

in two o'clock sand, baked
hair sunrays my head, my tanned skin
bubbling with mosquito bites.
I flex my toes against
the breeze blowing off the lake.

My best friend looms beside me
propped on one elbow
with his feathered
auburn hair, a shadow
smile in his gaze

as he casts over me.
I pick fallen cottonwood
buds from my bellybutton
and he returns
to the book in his lap:

a paperback Whitman anthology,
thrifed that morning.
I fold my arms behind
my head as he reads me
The Body Electric.

ALMOND AMGYDALA

October 7th, 2015

Her body is

being

hijacked.

She must fight,

freeze

or fly

but choose wisely.

This moment defines everything.

Rape poem

I am what I've always been
an animal
escaping
as flames burn through
the forest behind me.

I tried to fight
God, I it wasn't enough.

*Whether from pleasure or from pain
moans are formed the same way*

It starts with skin:
sensation, pressure,
something to choke

the arteries, make the blood
pump quicker, cells work harder,
achieve the action potential necessary

to send salty electricity shivering down neural
axons, for chemicals to pass from spidery dendrite
fingers to next somas, never touching, until the charge

shoots up, up the spinal cord to the brain and cumulates
in the parietal lobe as a blossoming sensory summation,
purple ink poured in water. The pulse travels

south to the diaphragm, which begins to flex faster,
deeper, lungs greedy for new oxygen. As air fills
the vacuum and is pushed out again, it brushes
past pink tensed vocal folds at the top of

the throat's larynx, their vibrations
becoming phonations,
moans.

You must be

the wisteria, slowly choking
the cedar hedge until you're not, shaping it
so it can never again be without you. Or am I

the wisteria, too? Asphyxiating myself
on the memory of your hands holding me down.
I trace the now vacant bends in the cedar's trunk
where the wisteria twisted around it and

think of my own empty spaces. Who is
the cedar hedge without the wisteria?
Who is the girl, with or without the ghost?

Slug and rust

I get high and drunk in the backyard with my sister.
Mama put fairy lights in the fig tree and sewed blue
silk cushions to sit on. I've never had eczema before this.
There's a spot on my right cheek and I cut
my fingernails just to scratch it better. I inhale
crackers three at a time and feel pasted on the roof
of my own mouth. I do fifteen sit-ups and one minute
of plank every day, and afterwards, I'm tired
and I get re-baked and slug and rust on the couch.
Mama brings me a homemade blackberry curd tart
with a sweet almond flour crust, and together, we watch
the world end on CBC. I don't care about the shooter's
name, his face a composition of tectonic plates that form
an ugly continent. I want to remember his victims
instead, their names. The hair on my nipples
are becoming more and thicker. More robust maybe.

The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even

A wasp, trapped
beneath a jar
on a light-soaked
windowsill. She struggles
and throws herself
against the glass
as her bachelors,
her policemen, her
undertakers examine
her. She lets herself want
open air.

A gown shed in a halo
of shimmering white
on the floor
beside the shower,
the wasp still
beneath the jar.
Past the glass,
dust floats in
lamp light like
a cosmic haunting
compelled
only to twirl.

Bed of moss

You sneak
in
under
quilted down
with butter skin
you touch
pillows of pussywillow

spend two years here
eat dust
pick off split ends

memorize
your father's face
before you tell him

wonder at how dampness
can make something
so soft
waste days
on feathers

NOCICEPTORS

Colossus

No ocean, no ocean
I will not break blue
because of you
the way you wanted me to

the day after you,
I dove into October
waves, through kelp,
flew down into sky

water, touched bottom,
came up baptized
and new. It's true,
I know you

enough to know nothing
will ever satisfy you -
no meat, no wine, no body
can undo a hunger so true

I do, I do
I do exist after
being eaten
by a colossus like you.

When I dream of my best friend who raped me

My stomach stands on the side of a cliff
and he is the ocean below. I tell him that I hate him,
yet I loved him, and that's why I hate him.

He replies with words spoken only in my dreams,
words that float in from far away. They are being
whispered from a distant shore on a small island

in the middle of a lake. They come from mist,
echo in my fingertips, thrum across my scalp
as my blood moves under bridges, through

wide canals. Words like *I'm sorry*. Pleas
like *forgive me*, like salty waves, like water
that's my body's exact temperature.

I say *I miss you*. I say *I hope*
one day I can forgive you. I am a canyon. I am sand
eroded by rain and wind and washed downriver.

November

It's nighttime and you're walking across the backyard to take the kitchen garbage to the bin in the lane. It's snowed for three days, and just past the gate, the orange glow of the streetlamp glitters off the powder, fills a tiny trail of fresh cottontail prints, moving from one side of the lane to the other, with shadows, and the sight halts you. Little whispers of existence almost as light as snow. You witness them, and upon the small miracle of noticing before they're brushed over, you become keenly aware of the highway at the end of your street and the countless cars rushing past and the smell of hot laundry soap from a dryer vent and the flickering rapid bluish glow of the television in your neighbour's window and your gumboots and the vast prints they make beside the rabbit's nothingness, and suddenly, standing there in your oversized jacket, clutching your trash, you begin to weep

at the beauty, at the fear, at the fragility, at the franticness, at the temporality,

at the heaviness of this life.

Dear moon,

the cold begins
where your curved back ends

I trace the contours of these words,
light as dust motes, into your ear

I want eternity, I want the noise
of forever to fill my soft bones

the feather duvet is leaking
snow from one corner

and all of this is to say,
to be awake is to be lonely

below you is night and
I am looking up in prayer

Body Electric

Dim tungsten light hits the steam
rising from my legs dangled
over the tub's edge. Half body cooked:
a blood-pooled, pink-skinned divide.
The toilet bowl is a cigarette grave.

Ash soaks into the damp mat.
My latest smoke rests impotently
in the corner of my mouth.
The tip of my ponytail is slick,
together, a paintbrush of blond tones.

I bare my nipples to the air,
and beneath water, faint bruises grab
my hips, dot my fat. Eyes pinched closed,
I gently puff, exhaling a dance of smoke.

Beside the tub, a tattered copy of
Whitman lies open like thighs,
like a fresh cut.

Tinder, 2 AM

He starts our first convo with

“What’s ur biggest fear?”

Men Men like you

I want to say

I reply

“Right now it’s the supervolcano

that could erupt any day

sending earth into ash winter”

I don’t tell him what I know,

I fear being powerless

the cotton sheets chill my body

“Oh” he quickly replies “interesting”

as if already disappointed by me

as if he wanted me to say men

I don’t care but ask anyway

“Ya what’s urs?”

he must mean women

when he replies “the open ocean”

Cervix is Latin for

neck. She is thirteen, standing in front
of a mirror, undressing slowly.

She is older, now.

Wine

crawling up a throat. Vertigo
in the murk of sleep.

Choking

on laughter and ladyfingers.
A bar of citrus soap, lathered,
and turning

over and over in a hand.

She is a mouth full
of red

meat,

a thin neck,

a larynx

holding onto her own peeled

name. She is bedroom eyes,

stoner eyes, butterfly tea

belly. She is teeth

sinking into mango, torn open
pomegranate. She is each individual calyx
on a sprig of spring lavender. She is
lavender

gasping between fingers.
Seasoned cast iron. Still,
she is undressing slowly,
painfully now.

SOFT PALATE

Right atrium

In the glass sunroom
covered in grape vines
at my parent's house,
on the pine chest
below the hanging ferns,
is a hand-carved burl bowl
filled with seashells.
The bowl is a gift
from my best friend
to my father.

The breeze rattles
windowpanes
every time I look
at that bowl.
The way he sculpted
the tree's cancer
with so much care.

Her body is

breaking
sun, early
morning warmth

blooming,
sweet, honeysuckles
by an open window

bending
into
the magnificent light

Ficus carica

In the back garden,
figs drip from branches like rainwater, teardrops,
garnet earrings hanging
off the lobes of a beautiful woman,
blood secretly falling
from between her legs.

Sweet wombs birth monsters
who fly from cervix to syconium. Their tiny bodies destined
to thicken the next inflorescent endometrium, the next flesh.

In the back garden,
the Ficus tree is a warning.
Carnivorous ovaries hang with their gentle skin
bruised purple, inside-out and becoming
juicer, redder. Their necks wilt
sensuously.

They speak softly to each other, habitually
saying *spring is here*
as they're broken open.

Three girls at the smoking bench

Not one of us wanted
these fragile bodies we call
home.

Still, here we stand
tongues numb
clove cigarettes between fingers
as lilac trees drape
pastel limbs over air
their perfume a close
and smothering
gravity
as we smoke by the smoking bench.

We know better than most that,
like a headrush, life ends.
We know that everyone surrenders
their body one day
because all three of us
have had our bodies stolen.

We have survived death:
murdered by men who forced us
to kneel, bend, lay down, bare
our beings with knees open,
who robbed us
of the bliss of belonging

to a body,
a bliss as delicate as hoarfrost
on the spiderwebs
in the concrete underpass
and as beautiful as morning
glory trumpets opening
for the sun's first light.

We have seen how it ends.
Let us tell you what we know:
it ends with ugly
creased white bedding
bone porcelain shattering
on bluest tiles
the hot bath water draining
until the naked body bathes in cold air.

We're sorry, we misspoke earlier
when we said morning glories open
for the sun.

It is the bewitched sun that rises
only to watch the petals'
rebirth.

Please never forget this.

Beneath my skin

contracted capillaries like
little streams, branching lines
across a palm, back country,
relax around blue puddled
blood from broken vessels.

Atop fat and muscle, concave
platelets form protein nets, sticky
globes of cells call themselves a bruise.
Fresh blood floods the area,

twirling hemoglobin ribbons
tie up oxygen. White blood cells
are there, too: monocytes covered
in protruding fingers, reaching out

to the contusion of platelets,
engulfing, devouring whole
my spilled, trapped, dead blood
cells into their plasma
membranes as I slowly repair.

Body of water

There you recline
on the chaise,
an oyster, an ocean.
On the kitchen countertop
nettle and lemongrass tea
steeps. I look back
and see you
the way you must see me:
vast, dark, honest;
something fluid
only to hold,
to want.

A cross section of a tree

Let's feel again
the topography
of our sick bodies: as the sun sets,
angles become islands;
our hands the earth's socket;
 two bowed backs
and rotten heartwood;
our shoulders covered
in roadkill; cancerous; and
 fingers touching
raised lines on the bed's map.
Let's dream instead of holding.

Let's imagine every building
abandoned and hidden in ivy,
every bone
 clean.

ILIUM BONE

The last time

the magnolia tree bloomed

the world ended

Our faces pressed together

in a prayer

Portrait of a midriff

I am skin
and skin and
silk

I am yesterday morning
wasted
mid-
night
folding over
myself

like pages
in a diary
I am curdled tea

butter
dripping
down
toast

I am high
rise undies
cream
honey
-‘d

supple fig
I am
the nose of a dog

I am a mid-
drif
-t moan
of your burning house
fever dream

soaking
into sheets
like cum

I am silk
and skin and
skin

The grape lives

in sweatpants and a tight
crop top. It feels tasty
peeled, but thinks this appeal
doesn't translate when clothed.

Eaters, why doesn't
the grape love
the way crop tops
accentuate its roundness?

You do. Have you ever
put the grape in
your mouth, filled
your cheeks with air,

and shook, bounced
it around? The grape
calls this game
getting fucked up.

It loves getting fucked up.
Yesterday, the grape
did a whole load of
purple crop tops. Have you

ever seen something
like that? An entire load
of purple laundry.

The grape flaunts

its figure despite its fatness.
It knows it is seedless,
dependable, even addictive,
and that everyone rubs its skin

before they pop it in. Eaters,
how many grapes will crunch
between teeth before you feel
whole again? It repeats,

I am a body, but

I am not just a body.

Scab

Isn't it magic?

Swimming over the drop-off of a sandbar.

The horror of it: bordered skin,

lusting for air

with closing legs.

A body coagulating and clotting

back together

in the cool air of darkness,

an impasto still life atop sheets,

crawling out again

from the hallow of bones, clutching

the meniscus with crooked toes, finally skimming

across the surface of the crescent moon.

To wit, healing.

Salt

When they finish, she lies
in between his torso and arm and
quietly cries. He holds her, knows

her, understands the unfairness
of memory. Johnny Cash plays
and they're already late to a party.

She says, I wish I could keep this feeling.
The comforter smells of skin and sweat
and home. He untangles himself

enough to lick the tears tracking
down her cheek. *You taste like wild*
strawberries, he says. His tongue is wind

blowing through aspen on a cut block.
He kisses each of her eyelids, says
and *you feel like wild rose petals*.

Veins

We almost always return
to the heart.

Soma

I spoke to you
about this earlier –
do you remember?

I'll tell you again:
no one can prepare you
for rape's totality.
How you never belong
to yourself again.
How you heal
too slowly,
how you become
lichen,

memories become
shadows
of figures, one bent
over the other,
cast across the wall,
every time someone touches
you, he touches you.

How you sleep
on the mattress
for years until one day
you decide to throw it away
and wonder why

it took so long.

How you look
for yourself
in everything -
every flower, every body
of water, every storm,
but you don't find
yourself in anything.

How you cry and rage
and spend years doing
nothing but indulging
in nightmares.

I could speak
of the way rape alters you
for forever.
Instead, let me leave you
with this:

on a cold day, do laundry
and when the drier stops
carry it to bed.
Lay out with it
and fall asleep.

I stand before you,

naked.

the electrons of me
mingling with the electrons
of you, my body millions
of double-stranded helixes
dancing close, wrapping
around each other, gelatinous
cytoplasm importing
and exporting, carbon and
oxygen and nitrogen in
various cosmic fantasies, bones
anointed in water and tissue
and life, the baroque
tummy of a fat Rubens
goddess, a pot belly,
thighs dimpled
with cellulite,

a trail of fine hair
below the bellybutton,
mouth slightly open,
heart murmuring,
fingernails painted
blood red,
thin and thick
filaments sliding
past each other

as the muscles
in my hand reach out
to you, offering
you all of me:
tender and
vulnerable,
soft and angular,
resilient,
angry,

and completely naked.

Critical Analysis

My creative writing thesis, *Soma*, is a poetic exploration of bodies, specifically my own body. My chapbook-sized collection of lyric poems explores bodies through figurative, material, and anatomical imagery with language that often overlaps, blends, and braids the three strands together, like a twisting double-stranded DNA helix (or in this case, a triple-stranded helix). I was sexually assaulted by my then-best friend on October 7th, 2015, when I was twenty-one years old. Since then, I have struggled to feel like I belong to my body, which is a common sentiment amongst survivors of sexual assault, who feel disconnected from their bodies, or feel like a part of themselves, even a physical part, was stolen by their abuser. *Soma* is a reclamation of this trauma. Through *Soma's* figurative objectification, abstraction, and poetic anatomical analysis of the body, I reclaim and relearn to love my own objectified, traumatized body, and offer a posthuman, new materialist, and ecofeminist lens to situate other femme bodies within the natural world.

Let us begin where the collection begins, with its title, *Soma*. The noun 'soma,' originating from Ancient Greek, translates to 'body,' but also has several relevant sub-definitions that encapsulate the essence of my thesis collection. First, in the anatomical sense of the word, soma refers to all parts of the body of an organism distinct from the reproduction cells or systems, but secondly, and corporeally, this definition of body also excludes the psyche and spirit of said organism. In other words, soma is the material body of the organism, not including reproductive cells. Thirdly, in a cytological sense, the soma of a neuron, or nerve cell, contains the nucleus, the cell's control centre. Altogether, these sub-definitions cover the intertwined layers of my thesis collection. After my sexual assault, I felt as if my body has been split apart, defined by parts, severed and separated from my mind and soul, my reproductive system possessed and distinct. I felt partitioned, as in the definition of soma, but also present and keenly aware of my nervous system

and all its neural firings. *Soma* is about bodies, specifically my own body, from cytological to anatomical to materially within the world, and the distinctions between psyche, spirit, and body become relevant as I deconstruct and reconstruct my body through poetry.

My vision for *Soma* was to create a body out of poetic text and (re)situate that body within the world through abstract imagery and metaphor. Like any body, my collection is (figuratively) organized into different tissues and organs in the form of five sections: Plasma, Almond Amygdala, Nociceptors, Soft Palate, and Ilium Bone. Of course, bodies have thousands of parts and my interest in these five is specific and purposeful. Alternatively, chronologically, *Soma* can be viewed as ‘before’ and ‘after’ a schism. The poems in the ‘before,’ consisting only of the section Plasma, are named after the bulk of the body’s blood, the stuff of life; these poems take place before my assault. These poems have a carefree focus, they’re seemingly random, thrown together to illustrate a life not yet defined and organized around a single moment. In poems like “Hedonism,” “Bliss,” and “Here the stars,” the poems’ speakers live in the moment, unaware of the impending fracture. They’re present in their bodies, consuming “raw sugar/ in black coffee,” handing their life over to the “liquid voice” of a “sorrowful soprano” in their headphones, wanting “jojoba oiled skin/ in the morning.” In this section’s final poem, “Cottonwood Beach,” we get the first glimpse of the collection’s antagonist, “my best friend,” who “looms” over the speaker, “cast[ing] over [her]” and objectifying her. This final poem marks the collection’s shift from the universal, neutral plasma of the body to more specific body parts coded by trauma.

Following Plasma, *Soma* narrows in on the amygdala, which is in the temporal lobe and is responsible for many important bodily functions, including emotional regulation, the fight-or-flight response, memory and sense processing, and disruptive thought processes, like depression, PTSD, and anxiety. Almond Amygdala opens with the poem “October 7th, 2015,” the titular poem

representing the night I was sexually assaulted, and continues with poems set in or about the aftermath of that defining moment. What follows in *Nociceptors*, *Soft Palate*, and *Ilium Bone* constitute the rest of the ‘after,’ so far, comprised of nociceptors, or pain receptors; the soft palate, the mechanism of speech and therefore voice; and the ilium bone, a butterfly-shaped bone and the site of my violence but also the site of resilience. These five sections frame and shape *Soma*, giving structure to the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of my body’s destruction on October 7th, 2015 and subsequent and ongoing reconstruction.

Throughout *Soma*, and specifically in the poem “October 7th, 2015,” I never describe my sexual assault in detail. This was important for me. First, the details surrounding my assault remain incredibly hard to speak or write about. Second, too often gender-based violence becomes a spectacle which, consciously or unconsciously, becomes entertainment. While approaching the writing of *Soma*, I knew I needed to reclaim agency over the events of my assault. I refuse to make my assault a spectacle. This is not about the perpetrator of my assault and who he is, or about reliving (or my readers living) his actions toward me. To this point, in “Slug and rust,” the speaker, while watching “the world end on CBC,” shares a similar sentiment upon seeing a news report about an unspecified mass shooting: she says, “I don’t care about the shooter’s/ name, his face a composition of tectonic plates that form/ an ugly continent. I want to remember his victims/ instead, their names.” The speaker, depressed and living at home, doesn’t want to know the shooter, she knows too many monsters already. She understands that people become immortalised through their violence and that their victims are often reduced to objects of this violence. She recognizes him as a monster, a shapeshifter whose face resembles that of a man’s, but isn’t quite put together correctly. By acknowledging this, she’s acknowledging that instead of his victims, the world will remain fixated on the wrongness of this man’s makeup. For these reasons, *Soma* lacks concrete

details about my rape. This void of information at the centre of the project removes the spectacle from the act of sexual assault and shifts focus onto the victim's body and her recovery.

Through *Soma*, I reclaim my objectified body through self-objectification. The collection opens with "Looking at myself," a fast-paced, metaphor-rich poem that offers many different images describing how the speaker's body is a wound, a broken open thing. While this poem establishes my poetic style, short lines and cascading metaphors, it also delivers a final stanza that sets the stage for the collection's self-objectification. This stanza opens with the repetition of "I am a wound," but instead of moving onto a lofty metaphor comparing the speaker's body to a river or weeds poking up through toes, the poem subverts the established order by zooming in on the image of the speaker "sitting on the blue/ linoleum" bathroom floor "holding on/to a cheap plastic mirror/ between my open legs." This image holds a specific nostalgia of puberty and girlhood. Like many pre-teens, my mother gave me a book about getting to know my changing body when I was eleven. This book instructed me to do what the final stanza of "Looking at myself" describes, to look at my own anatomy using a portable mirror. For many young women who attempt this, this is probably the first time that they actually see their own anatomy. Until then, and perhaps still, it's a mystery.

Importantly, as mentioned earlier, this poem comes before the "October 7th, 2015" schism representing my sexual assault. Although I felt it was important to have this poem set the tone for the entire collection, I also wanted to open with this girlhood moment of self-discovery, that was, for me, free from trauma, but that would begin the slow unraveling of my life. However, still, there is something clinical and cold about the image. Perhaps it's the image's proximity to the image of "my supine body/ on the operating table" or it's the cold linoleum and cheap plastic mirror or the speaker's loneliness. Or, perhaps, it is because the speaker has spent the entire poem up until this

final stanza establishing herself, for good or bad, as a wound, and this final stanza connects the speaker's wound to what's between her open legs. This theme of self-objectification runs like sinew throughout *Soma*. It is not a doctor or a lover or a predator looking at her, but the speaker herself looking at herself, at her body and her life, finding a way to heal her wounded body.

This same girlhood nostalgia repeats later in *Soma* in the poem "Cervix is Latin for." This poem opens with the lines "She is thirteen, standing in front/ of a mirror, undressing slowly." Again, the image is steeped in girlhood nostalgia. However, unlike the innocent nostalgia from the final stanza of "Looking at myself," the nostalgia in "Cervix is Latin for" is sinister. It evokes the performative sexuality inundated into women from an early age. This is confirmed by the rapid jump in time, in maturity; in the next line, the speaker is "older, now" and later in the poem she is "still undressing slowly,/ painfully." At thirteen, the speaker practices undressing for a future lover, but her older self, still undressing, is now damaged. The implication is that the unnamed lover(s) she has undressed for between then and now is the cause of her pain. Like an object, the poem's speaker remains trapped in the single dizzying function of undressing: "A bar of citrus soap, lathered,/ and turning/ over and over in a hand," or, as in a different poem "The Bride Stripped Bare," "dust" that "floats in/ lamp light like/ some cosmic haunting/ compelled/ only to twirl." It is only through objectification and metaphor that the speaker's pain can be understood.

Throughout *Soma*, self-objectification and metaphor allows for the poems to articulate complex emotions associated with sexual assault and objectification. Mark Johnson writes, "meaning is grounded in the body," (274) and my poetry constantly tries to tie bodily experience to tangible images. A major theme of *Soma* is pain. As Elaine Scarry writes in her book *The Body in Pain*, pain is an incredibly challenging experience to convey. Pain, physical or emotional, is alienating and lonely. Scarry writes, "whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability and it ensures this

unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). The best way to adequately attempt to convey pain is through metaphor. As Mark Johnson writes in *The Meaning of the Body*, “the principal philosophical reason why image schemas and conceptual metaphors are important is that they make it possible for us to use the structure of sensory and motor operations to understand abstract concepts and to draw inferences about them” (181). Johnson’s philosophy around the importance of metaphor in understanding complex experiences that don’t belong to you was crucial in writing *Soma*. Like in “Cervix is Latin for,” the smothering pain of constant objectification is described using the metaphor “She is/ lavender/ gasping between fingers,” and, similarly, in “You’ve become a phantom limb,” the permanent change the speaker’s abuser imprinted on the speaker is demonstrated through the metaphor of a (removed) wisteria’s physical alteration to a cedar hedge it was once entangled with.

Soma is deeply posthuman; first, it is posthuman in the sense that it is post-humanism. As Rosi Braidotti explains, a posthuman feminist does not want to throw humanism away entirely but believes it should be reviewed and updated (*Posthuman Feminism* 17). Of course, I wouldn’t be able to write this collection if I weren’t human, so as Braidotti notes, any discussions of posthumanism are inherently flawed by humanity. However, she writes,

the ‘Man’ of classical humanism was positioned at the pinnacle of an evolutionary scale, which classified different classes of beings lower down hierarchical ranks and roles.

They are the ‘others’ defined as the negative opposites of the dominant human norm.

The point here is that difference, being ‘other than’ or ‘different from’ ‘Man’, is actually negatively perceived as ‘worth less than’ ‘Man’. This epistemic and symbolic exclusion is no abstraction: it translates into ruthless violence for the real-life people who happen to

coincide with categories of negative difference... Their social and symbolic existence was denied, leaving them disposable and unprotected (18-19).

Even just the act of decentring my rapist's narrative throughout *Soma* is an act of resistance against the humanist patriarchy. It was humanism, with its capitalist trappings and anthropocentric colonialism, that created a society in which my rapist felt entitled to me and my body. To write about my body, a non-Anthropos body, and my body's trauma and experiences is post-humanist feminist resistance.

Second, and this has been touched upon previously, *Soma* is posthuman in the sense that the collection is ecofeminist and new materialist. Braidotti describes the posthuman feminist body as a "ontological site of becoming," writing, "posthuman feminists return to material bodies, and their materiality includes mediated representations. The focus is on real-life, embodied and embedded, relational and affective women and LGBTQ+ people, with their pleasures and pain and respective implications in mechanisms of power" (113). The constant objectification through metaphor not only provides a way to understand complex and intangible experiences, it also purposefully aligns the collection's femme body (or bodies) to nature and the natural world.

In "Her body is," the poem's subject is compared to sunshine's warmth and sweet-smelling honeysuckles. The enjambment in this poem initially alludes to violence being done to her body: "Her body is/ breaking/ sun, early morning warmth." The line break on "breaking" indicates violence as her body is breaking. This notion is then subverted by the next line break, when changes the meaning of the breaking into "breaking sun," a metaphor comparing her body to the sun with all its life-giving properties. Instead of more violence being done to her, as is often heaped onto representations of femme bodies (I use 'femme' instead of 'female' to be inclusive), the beauty and power of her body is celebrated through positioning it alongside nature, a concept that humanism

has insisted upon in order to diminish women and prove their status as lesser than. Here, instead, her alignment with nature becomes power. Evidence of the femme body's embrace of nature is present throughout *Soma*. In "Looking at myself," the speaker's body is compared to "a slate river" and "sheet lighting." In "November," the poem's speaker relates to a cottontail rabbit as she takes in the terrifying, inhospitable, and fast cityscape around her. In "Dear moon," the moon is the speaker's lover and in "The grape lives," the speaker is literally a grape who insists at the end of the poem that she is "not just a body."

Another prevalent ecofeminist theme throughout *Soma* is water imagery. The link between femme bodies and moisture is a pre-modern one. As with the humanism's base alignment of women and the natural world, humanism views women as leaky, wet, and lowly. Astrida Neimanis, in her book *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, writes, "We are a watery world... Water irrigates us, sustains us, comprises the bulk of our soupy flesh... counted here are not only humans and other animals, plants, funghi, protoctists, but also geological and meteorological bodies such as oceans, rivers, aquifers, subterranean streams, clouds storms, swamps, and soils – all dripping or tidal or damp" (27). *Soma* embraces this notion; it is dripping wet. One example of this is the poem "Tinder, 2 AM." In this poem, the speaker messages a random man for the first time on an online dating app. The poem flips between the speaker's responses to the man's bizarre and somewhat threatening conversation opener, "What's ur biggest fear?," and her internal dialogue while responding. In the end, when she asks him what his biggest fear is, he replies "the open ocean," which she interprets to mean women. The speaker in "Tinder, 2 AM" cannot know that the man she's messaging means women when he writes the open ocean, however, her assumption indicates an embrace of ecofeminism's alignment with nature; the poem's speaker wants to be compared to the ocean, mysterious, powerful, and deep. Neimanis writes, "Blood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to

out, from watery womb to watery world: *we are bodies of water*” (pg.1). Beyond “Tinder, 2 AM,” the femme bodies throughout *Soma* are bodies of water, pouring out, bleeding, raging like rivers, being consumed, consuming, ebbing, flowing, crying, bathing, and being baptized whole again. Again, this embrace of what the patriarchy has deemed the diminished state of femme bodies is resistance.

A major component of *Soma* is anatomy. In my introduction to this section, I wrote about *Soma*’s three strands, figurative, literal, and anatomical, twisting together to form a triple-stranded DNA helix. So far, the significance of the figurative strand has been discussed. The importance of the anatomical strand is threefold. First, I find anatomy to be incredibly interesting. Bodies are so marvelously complex and beautiful, and I feel that examining the building blocks of an organism’s makeup through poetry celebrates life. Second, as with other posthuman elements of *Soma*, discussing the mechanics of bodies, their makeups and systems, removes some of humanism’s human/non-human dichotomy, demonstrating that we are animals and that the same Anthropos exceptionalism that allows for widespread sexual assault against women also allows for environmental destruction, colonialism, and capitalism. Braidotti writes, “living matter – including embodied human flesh – is intelligent and self-organizing, but it is so precisely because it is not disconnected from the rest of organic life and connects to the animal and the earth” (113). In “Rape Poem,” the speaker explains, “I am what I’ve always been/ an animal/ escaping.” These lines connect my trauma to the trauma of the natural world. Poems like “Here I stand,” “Somatosensory,” “Ficus carica,” and “Beneath my skin” all feature anatomical imagery and language, and in doing so, facilitate the connection between bodies and the natural world.

The third, and most important, purpose of the anatomical strand of *Soma* regards the repercussions of sexual violence on the self; sexual assault and rape splits the body from the mind. A common sentiment amongst survivors of sexual violence is feeling like they no longer belong in

their own bodies because their bodies have been stolen by someone else; control has been taken from them. Above all other reasons to write *Soma*, I wrote it as a means of falling in love with every aspect of myself again. I feel that to properly achieve this, I had to spend time writing about all the intricacies and details of my body. The poem “Beneath my skin,” is the third instalment out of three poems that run throughout *Soma* and act as a sort of connecting narrative thread. These poems are “Cottonwood Beach,” “Body Electric,” and “Beneath my skin.” Although the connection between these three poems may not be explicit, they’re the only three poems to be formatted with a two-centimetre indentation, signaling their sameness. In “Body Electric,” the speaker describes how, “faint bruises grab/[her] hips,” the same hips that suntan at the beach in “Cottonwood Beach.” In “Beneath my skin,” the poem zooms into said bruises to poetically describe the literal healing of flesh: fibrin nets form and catch damaged red blood cells, white blood cells dispose of the dead cells, and hemoglobin supplies the area with oxygen so every cell can perform and heal optimally. The actual process of the body healing itself is profoundly beautiful. Throughout *Soma*, wounds, scabs, and bruises are recurring motifs. These motifs do not function only metaphorically but also as stand alone images celebrating the magic and wonder of the body as a means of, perhaps, falling in love with myself again after trauma, both physical and mental.

The final ‘strand’ of the triple-stranded DNA helix is the body’s material representation throughout the poems of *Soma*. This representation is often blurred with the figurative and anatomical layers, but also often distinct. Often the bodies in *Soma* appear static, in bed, in the bath, lying in bed after the bath, and so on. Through *Soma*, I explore the intersection between vulnerability and bodies, and because of this the poems are deeply intimate, whether by way of setting, form, content, or use of pronouns. Again, as with the anatomical aspect of *Soma*, I will reiterate that *Soma* is above all else a poetic love letter to my own traumatized body. Because of this, I wanted to position bodies within the text in intimate ways; however, like the definition of *Soma*, I wanted this

intimacy to be (mostly) separate from sexuality. The femme bodies of *Soma* are usually alone, often naked, but more importantly, learning to enjoy life again in whatever small way that is possible in that moment. Chanel Miller, in her memoir, writes, “I survived [sexual assault] because I remained soft...I huddled close to my truth, protected it like a tiny flame in a terrible storm” (328). A very intimate and crucial poem in *Soma* is “Bed of moss.” This poem, although it contains some fantastical and whimsical imagery, is about spending years in bed, re-learning how to be alive following trauma. In “Bed of moss,” the poem’s subject stays in bed for two years, “[eating] dust,” “[picking] off split ends,” and “[wasting] days/ on feathers.” This bed is a safe place, a soft place, where the subject can be still, tender, and her vulnerable self: she can just heal and learn to love being naked again. As Ocean Vuong writes in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, “Sometimes being offered tenderness feels like the very proof that you’ve been ruined” (119). Without the still-life intimacy of *Soma*’s literal representations, the figurative or anatomical representations wouldn’t be as powerful. *Soma* is an attempt to resituate the body within the world after violence and trauma, and often, as Miller writes, this is only possible by remaining soft, even if that softness only extends to the limits of one’s bed. The material representations in *Soma*, in all their tenderness and vulnerability, allow readers to understand how ruined the subject of *Soma* is, but also how beautiful and resilient a healing body can be.

The triple-stranded helix of my thesis collection *Soma* twists together to form the portrait of a femme body, in pain yet healing. The first ‘strand,’ the metaphorical strand, strengthens the connection between the femme body, which has been traumatized through gender-based violence, to the natural world as a posthuman, new materialist, and ecofeminist act of resistance. The second ‘strand,’ the anatomical strand, explores the beautiful complexity of the body to facilitate falling in love with oneself, one tissue at a time. The third and final ‘strand,’ the material strand, situates the healing femme body within the world, insisting on softness, time, and vulnerability as essential to

healing trauma. These three strands of the triple-stranded DNA helix makeup a collection of disparate, short, often anxious, sometimes disembodied poems that thematically fit together to form a body. The body of *Soma* is almost always in bed, sometimes posed as a honeysuckle next to an open window and sometimes as a clotting wound, but nonetheless, mending cell by cell.

Sources

I'd like to write briefly about my inspirations and sources for *Soma*. As this is a collection of poetry, I will begin with the poets who inspire me; they include Warsan Shire, Ocean Vuong, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, Adrienne Rich, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Evelyn Lau, Mary Oliver, Dylan Thomas, John Thompson, and Leonard Cohen. Particularly, Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck*, Warsan Shire's *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, and Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* were essential to *Soma*. Rich's collection is one of the most important collections of poetry to speak to gender-based violence and sexual assault. I admire Shire's imagery and strong female voice; she's a poet I return to over and over and who inspires my own voice. The poem "Colossus" was heavily influenced by Plath's poem "Daddy" and shares the same title as Plath's other collection of poetry, *Colossus*. I feel as if Plath is a poet who deeply understands and eloquently conveys the trauma and heartbreak of womanhood. As well, the beautiful Walt Whitman poem "I Sing the Body Electric," a long poem celebrating bodies in movement, is a poetic inspiration, although Whitman, one of my favorite poets, now brings me pain to read.

Beyond poetry, Hanya Yanagihara's 2016 novel *A Little Life* is important to my understanding of the physical and mental manifestations of violence and trauma on the body and how to beautifully write about them. *A Little Life* is a heartbreaking novel about childhood trafficking, sexual abuse, rape, disability, pain, and mental illness, but also resilience, love, friendship, and survival. Beautifully written, it inspired me to be vulnerable with my own experiences. As well, Chanel Miller's 2019 memoir, *Know My Name*, which chronicles her sexual assault and its aftermath, was an important source for writing *Soma*. As a survivor of sexual assault herself, Miller understands the loneliness of assault. When I feel most alone in my experience, turning to firsthand accounts like hers have brought me comfort and inspired me to keep writing. In her book, she writes, "I always

wondered why survivors understood other survivors so well. Why, even if the details of our attacks vary, survivors can lock eyes and get it without having to explain,” (6) and I think this quote sums up the importance of representation perfectly. Survivors are inherently connected to each other and more voices telling their stories will lead to more stories getting told and more opportunities for change.

Marcel Duchamp's 1915-1923 work *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* inspired my ekphrastic poem by the same name. I have been fascinated with this avant-garde mechanical piece and all its lore since I first laid eyes on it in the second year of my undergrad. Duchamp's piece has an accompanying manifesto and legend (which is itself a Pandora's Box). Although the piece may appear abstract, it is actually a blueprint for a machine whose parts include nine "Malic Moulds:" a Priest, a Delivery boy, a Gendarme, a Cavalryman, a Policeman, an Undertaker, a Servant, a Busboy, and a Station-master; "Capillary Tubes;" the "Milky Way;" a "Magnifying Glass;" and of course, the Bride or "*Pendu femelle*." The entire piece is composed on top of a large two-panel glass frame or window. Famously, any damage that the piece incurred was incorporated in its design, including the glass smashing during transport and dust collecting on it over time, which Duchamp sealed into the piece with adhesive. There has been a lot written on the piece's meaning, but I interpret it to be quite disturbing and violent. The Bride, who I find to resemble a wasp, is at the centre of this machine and is stripped bare in front of these masculine figures and the piece's audience. The machine is cyclical: she is not only literally objectified but also is forced to relive her humiliation over and over as the machine functions, as if her objectification fuels the machine. In my poem with the same name, I wanted all the poem's components, the wasp, the bride, and the dust to exist only as objects with a singular function in the larger man-made machine: the bride undressed before the patriarchy; the wasp trapped in a glass, dying; and the dust "compelled/ only to twirl." In this way, I

connect the three in a posthuman way while also demonstrating the cyclical violence done to non-Anthropos bodies.

Finally, I took inspiration from academic and philosophical texts, some of which I have already quoted in my critical analysis. Two others that are not yet mentioned, but nonetheless important, are Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Butler's crucial third-wave feminist philosophy questions gender performativity and helped me to understand what constitutes the material makeup of a femme body, or more importantly, how it is defined. De Beauvoir's seminal text delves into humanism's exclusionary history. It remains a primary text for the posthuman feminist movement, and thus, important to my project.

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