

Knowing my body



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The author is a member of the Class of 2008 at the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Medicine. This essay won honorable mention in the 2006 Alpha Omega Alpha Helen H. Glaser Student Essay Competition.

I hold my breath and step on the scale as the neon digits flash on the screen. Blink twice in disbelief. No. God, no. Remembering the formula we learned last semester, I calculate my body mass index in my head: weight divided by height squared. I am entering the upper limit of the “normal” range. Please, God, no.

I will starve myself.

Walk back to the locker and dress. The waist band of my jeans feels tight. I avert my eyes past full-length mirrors. Out of the women’s locker room and down the stairs, faces pass and contemplate me. What a pretty girl she would be if—

When the key turns in the ignition the car stereo resumes playing: *Look for the girl with the broken smile. Ask her if she wants to stay awhile. And she will be loved.*

Turn the radio off. The plan of starvation makes my

stomach ache. I have to eat something, *just a little something*, and *then* I'll begin starvation. Half a grapefruit, forty calories. Nothing more.

I clutch the steering wheel and hurl vicious insults: Fat, lazy, ugly. No one will love me. I will never be happy. I'm an embarrassment to everyone who knows me.

Anxiety consumes me. But there are no tears. Only fantasies: the graham crackers in the cabinet, the waffles in the freezer. Walking up and down the grocery store aisles picking up boxes of doughnuts and bags of cookies and reveling in the pleasure of devouring them one by one. These fantasies make my mouth water. I know this is a phenomenon known as classical conditioning in which a reflex is initiated that links the cortical system with vagal stimulation of the salivary glands. Forget the grapefruit. I want to binge.

Pray that my roommate is not in the apartment and plow through yellow lights. I have to get home.

Park and walk up the sidewalk. I wish there was someone to confide in. Maybe my mom. No, I know what she would say: *Just eat less*. Maybe my boyfriend. No, I can't. I don't want him to know how much I hate myself.

Pushing open the front door, I hear music playing. Shit. She's home.

I shout hello and throw down my bag. Pour a heaping bowl of Lucky Charms and splash milk on top of it. Put two waffles in the toaster oven. I confiscate the cereal and the box of graham crackers to my room. I spoon the cereal without tasting it. All I feel is texture.

I swallow hungrily and move onto the graham crackers, shoving them into my mouth two at a time. I can feel the physical process of ingestion stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system, which produces a calming sensation throughout my body. It is the crunch of the graham cracker that relieves me, if only for a few minutes.

The toaster oven dings. I give a sideways glance towards my roommate's doorway. She is staring intently at her biochemistry textbook, oblivious. Now syrup on waffles and fingers as I stuff them in vigorously. Another bowl of cereal. Two more waffles in the toaster.

I shouldn't do this.

I should go into my room and write until this urge passes.

But I don't want to. Right now all I want to do is binge.

A box of crackers from the shelf. A block of cheese and a bottle of Diet Coke from the refrigerator. Cereal. Crackers. Cheese. Soda. I know the amylase and lingual lipase enter my saliva and begin to break down starch and fat in my mouth and esophagus. But I know absorption won't occur until the first bolus reaches the duodenum. And that takes several minutes. I have time.

The toaster oven dings again and I drench waffles with syrup. I taste nothing.

I stand in the kitchen in bare feet and hug my abdomen.

By and about the author

I grew up in Chicago and attended Stanford University, where I majored in English and minored in Human Biology. As a medical student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I am involved in the College of Medicine's literary journal as a student editor. I continue to write poetry and prose about my personal and professional experiences as a medical student. In addition to writing, I tutor other medical students, volunteer at a free clinic, and conduct research on depression among Type II diabetics.

I wrote "Knowing My Body" to reflect on the conflict I experience as a medical student with an eating disorder, and as a means of catharsis. I hope it will shed light on the frequent discrepancy that exists between the glossy exterior of high achieving medical students and their inner thoughts and feelings.



The sense of fullness is oppressive. One final swig of Diet Coke and then a sprint to the bathroom. Run the sink and shower simultaneously, praying that they are loud enough. I pause in front of the mirror and study my face. I don't recognize myself. I have no idea who that person is.

I strip, crouch over the toilet and stare at the water. A wave of shame passes through me.

Three fingers down my throat. I am pleased with how easily food comes up. I have been trained. I know this well. The pharyngeal branch of cranial nerve IX carries the sensation to the brain. Nerve X provides the innervation to the muscles of the digestive tract causing a reverse peristalsis that forces the food up.

I am careful to minimize the gagging noises to avoid detection. Vomit falls into the toilet, splashing onto the seat and slapping my bare chest. With every retch, I feel lighter.

At last nothing more comes. I wipe my face and the toilet seat and flush. Squeeze toothpaste onto my toothbrush and scrub vigorously. The stomach acid can damage the enamel of my teeth. I spit and rinse.

I push aside the curtain and step under the water. I turn the handle to the right and revel in the burning hot that engulfs me. I feel calm. Light. Empty. I squeeze a soapy loofah on my abdomen and watch the suds run down my legs into the drain.

I turn off the shower and wrap myself in a towel. I wipe away the fog from the mirror and stare.

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