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Daniel Fleischman
SUNY Geneseo

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Chasing Reflections

It is one thing to recognize who's in the mirror but quite another to feel a connection. I can picture, with an assuredness that makes it scrunch up, every contour of my face, but I cannot bring myself to know it is mine on an emotional level. I can only guess at reflections of faded blue eyes, half-grown eyebrows, and inadvertent scowls to pick myself out from a crowd.

I try to recognize my face under harsh bathroom lighting—all sense of connection warped and washed out. I am seventeen. It is the height of August. I look in my familiar mirror and see a face I don't want, a face of someone stuck in his ways, a face that seems pudgy and dull and repulsive. Maybe it's the bathroom's salmon-pink walls and outdated spherical light fixtures just above the mirror. I watch the mouth hang ajar as I taste something sour. The face is mine, and I know it too well. I stare into my eyes imploring the mirror to change who I am, high on snippets of weight loss stories, warnings from my doctor, and appearance possibilities. I resolve then to lose the physical burden of who I was, not to indulge myself any longer.

I saw, in my mind, the man I wanted to mold out of the fat of a boy, to sculpt with the intention and pride I lacked. In front of the mirror, I imagine my thumb and forefinger pinching and dragging to create prominent cheekbones and a jawline like shattered glass barely covered by tanned skin. I wrangle my nose with a crack and squeeze of its bony bridge, bringing it to a gentle, inconspicuous slope. I try to twist my expression into something new, massaging flesh into a face disinterested in the world. I force open my eyes, so my irises don't simply leak out from squinting eyelids like beady afterthoughts. I rip apart rough blotches of skin and remove the capillaries just under the surface—fingernails negotiating with anatomy to eliminate my propensity to blush. I yank at my cheeks hoping to make my face gaunt and chiseled. I bash in my forehead with the base of my palm in an effort to

combat how far it protrudes. I want a face like a wall, able to wholly contain the humdrum of the restless neuroses going on in my head. I want to create a Frankenstein's monster of myself—an amalgamation of stolen anatomy I could bend to my own vain ideals.

I wanted to construct my face, pick out the pieces and tweak. To choose. To morph and distort to fit my perception of stoic, of attractive. I wanted a face with a stony, unencumbered gaze my mind could attempt to imitate. I wanted everyone to see me, to want me, not this desperate need to chase. I wanted a face that doesn't twitch its pleading eyes around to its own reflection at every turn.

Pleading eyes only go so far for identifying a problem to be changed. You must substantiate a problem before it can be addressed. Food is the problem. Food merges with your identity and self-perception, the fat, the chronic exhaustion, the overeating, the Fluffernutter sandwiches with far too much fluff, the ginger ale you somehow convince yourself it's okay to suck down when you get home from school, the excessive salt of leftover pork chops you scarf down because it makes more sense to finish them up before you make more, the stretch marks that adorn your abdomen and grow up with you, the blue jeans that are more like circus tents, and the person you've become, the only person you know, the person you've resigned to accept.

Eating was a part of my identity. It felt good to taste things and gorge myself beyond the pressure of a full belly, and it was better than doing nothing. Food fills time and space. Eating goes beyond a biological process. Losing weight, like it or not, means losing parts of yourself.

Gym class. Senior year of high school. The assignment is to assess your physical condition by BMI, place yourself in a category—obese, overweight, healthy, or underweight—and evaluate what steps to take to reach “healthy” on a little index card. There's something demoralizing about honesty, accepting the truth about your own wrongdoings, failures, and weaknesses. There's something demoralizing about taking that real look at yourself—to become your own objective mirror. But I was honest then. I sat on a bleacher of beige plastic, seething as I forced my hands to stop trembling. Tennis shoes squeaked on the sticky gloss of the gym floor. *My name is Daniel Fleischman. I am currently obese at seventeen with a weight of 281 pounds. I should eat less and exercise more.*

I didn't follow my own instructions then. I was complicit in letting myself languish in self-destruction. I ate and ate knowing full well the dangers of not being “healthy,” and I went along with it, for nearly eighteen years I went along with it.

I tell people my motivation was my health. That's only half the truth. August, the summer before college, the phone rings. I've been dreading the

call. It was my doctor, a pediatrician who has known me since I was born and watched me grow tall and wide. He was following up on bloodwork from a checkup two weeks earlier.

“Hello?” I say.

“Hi. Is this Daniel Fleischman?” His voice was restrained, languid even, deep and smooth as it always was, paternal in his delivery. He knew just where to inflect, perfect bedside manner. Maybe he’s just a good person.

“Hi, Dr. Branch.” I begin to pace around my kitchen.

“We have the results back from your blood work.” Papers rustle.

There are still scabs from the blood being drawn, my arm too fat to find the vein on the first go. I walk down the hall and into the bathroom, the one with salmon-pink walls and round lights. “Go ahead,” I say. I know it isn’t going to be good.

“Your blood pressure is a little high; so is your cholesterol. You fall into what we consider pre-diabetic. You’re at a heightened risk for type 2 diabetes. If we don’t make a change to your diet or exercise routine, your health will remain in question,” he says.

I lean on the sink with one elbow, phone in the other, and look down. I couldn’t look in the mirror. He reads off several more formalities—tips for portion control, a suggestion to do more cardio, and advice to discuss this with my parents. He asks me if I understand. I do. All the fat and excess skin on my torso droop downwards as my back arches over the sink.

“Thank you for calling, Dr. Branch. I’ll eat less and exercise more.”

I didn’t know if that was a lie or just an empty promise. The least I could do was look in the mirror. I should’ve been concerned with my health. I was. I am. But, in the moment, all I saw was my ugly face. I didn’t want to be ugly. I wanted to be more attractive, slimmer, appealing. I had graduated from high school that June, and I didn’t want to be fat through college. I wanted to reinvent myself, rebel like so many others do, become a new person, kiss someone, have sex, lose myself and the face I recognized all too much, and watch it all melt off like quicksilver. I wanted to change the reflection, my outward presentation to the world and all its creatures, at any cost.

The cost was food. About two weeks after I had decided to slim down that summer, my first sacrifice came and went. My family and I went to get ice cream. All four of us: my father who’s had salt-and-pepper hair since he was twenty-something. He dyes his hair brown now. He likes navy blue nylon dry-fit shirts and cell phone holders that attach to his belts. He shed the carapace that was his own obesity a couple years before. I can still remember the tattered green recliner that used to creak and whimper under him as he drank coke by the liter and vanilla ice cream by the tub before passing out, not to be disturbed. My father’s weight left with that chair, yet the memory lingers. My mother who has hazel hair that curls down to her shoulders and frames

a round face. Her presence brings the word *jolly* to mind, but you bite your tongue because that would be an awful thing to say. She once looked like me. She feeds the family. Every morning and night for our entire lives, she has fed us. She takes pride in feeding us, but she turns down compliments. A good cook, nothing more. Food made us happy, so she fed us. Us, as in my sister who pretends not to care, and me. My sister who was as voracious as me but smiled more, who doubted I could shed the pounds that she hasn't managed to, who was most surprised to see me thin, who, I believe, feels guilt over that doubt in hindsight.

We went to an ice cream stand called King Kone whose sign is a creepy ice cream cone with a face: smug, smirking, and cold. Its cheeks are permanently red and reminded me of my own. I saw my face in the sign's undefined jawline and head, round like a marshmallow. It seemed to laugh at me as it taunted my stomach into rumbling.

"What are you gonna get, Dan?" my sister asks as we drive up, my eyes still observing the sign.

"Nothing."

"He's been eating less, Jess, honey. You know that," my mother says, coming to my defense as she often does.

"But you have to have some," my sister insists, digging her finger into my cheek. "Why did you even come with us if you're not getting any ice cream?"

"I wanted to spend time with you guys," I say in good faith, while swatting her hand away with rotund fingers, fully aware food is what brings families, ours included, together. When you're eating, you don't have to talk. We pull into the parking lot.

My usual order was a medium chocolate-vanilla twist with rainbow sprinkles, always rainbow sprinkles. Instead I feast my eyes on familial tongues shoveling the frozen custard into their mouths. I surprise myself when I am actually able to hold back and not get a cone. *All I have to do is not eat. The more you put in, the more weight you'll put on. Not doing something is easier than doing something.* Thoughts followed me around as a hundred pounds sloughed off like an insect's molt. I watched my reflection in the side window the whole way home.

You must commit to losing weight; eating is a choice that can be denied. All I did was cut calories, limit portion size, and, well, skip meals. Breakfast was out, and lunch was something I learned to go without most days—a secret deprivation I held close to my slimming chest when my mother called and asked if I was eating. Fall semester, freshman year of college was colored by dizzy spells and the warm, fuzzy black of failing peripheral vision when I stood up too fast. I only fainted once.

I got out of bed and stood on legs that gave out like the spongy grilled chicken I would allow myself. A tingling sensation originating from my stomach climbed up my spine. My vision went to black, then I felt my knees, my forearms hit the floor, and then my head hit the dresser. But I was fine, resilient, strong. I had resolve.

I knew what I was doing was wrong and destructive and too far in the other extreme. I knew that in the moment, and I know that much better now looking back. I can't change my actions, though, especially when I reap the benefits now. I can't condemn myself for my past methods when I'm content with the results in the present. All I can do is accept it and move on.

I knew I had succeeded, and I wanted others to know, too—to look up at the cliff I stood atop, the one that had taken so long to climb. After freshman year of college, a year after I began to lose the weight, I went to see Dr. Branch for another checkup. I told my mother I wanted to make sure everything was up to par in terms of health, but, deep down, I wanted to be praised.

I drive to his office, stealing glances at myself in the rearview mirror. I park and step out, my eyes jump from window to window in search of better views of myself. I step through the automatic doors. The waiting room is empty besides a receptionist, a rainbow of plastic children's chairs, and a fish tank. I sit across from the fish tank and meet my own eyes in the reflection while I pretend to watch fish. The seat feels so much better when you can fit in it. I am called into the office.

There, I strip to my boxers and mess with the scale, satisfied. Dr. Branch walks in.

“Wow, look at you! You look great,” he says.

I smile.

“This is absolutely fantastic. I can see you've really taken your health to heart. This is one of the most drastic improvements I've seen in my career. You've made my week, Daniel. How'd you do it?”

“Portion control.” I don't tell him about starving myself.

Frankenstein's monster was beautiful before it came to life. Is guilt the right word for what I felt? Maybe. Or was it pride? Acceptance, regret, shame, control, or strength, perhaps? Did I hate who I was or simply want to improve? Did I just switch from gluttony to vanity, indulging my thin dreams pulled taut like a sheet over a bottomless pit of insecurity rather than resigning myself to a life of endless pepperoni and onion pizzas? These are the thoughts that enter my mind when I look in a mirror. I don't have answers. They just float around in space as I look myself in the eye with a dash of pity and glimmers of satisfaction, my hands resting on the cold porcelain of my sink. I can't help but watch my reflection match my stride and meet my eyes in a window

as I walk past. I try to grab my thoughts as I ogle the image of my face in the screen of my phone. I'm forced to meet my own gaze, myself a reflection, as I try to find the line between new and old.

People throw the word "journey" around like it means something. I stood still, and the world moved around me, twisting and distorting like rolls of fat moving out like a shockwave, as if someone smacked my gut when I was seventeen. I chose to stop moving, forego who I was a hundred pounds ago in favor of a face I didn't know in a reflection I'd never seen. I thought I could be better. I thought losing weight would do that. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* ends in a long, desperate chase: Victor Frankenstein chases his creation, his monster, the reflection of his and humanity's greatest delusions, into frozen tundra and death. Then the monster mourns.

For a long time, I would look at mirrors and want to see something else, but I never sloughed off my cynical, self-serving doubts that a thin me would ever be me. Thin is impossible; fat is forever. But now I am thin, and I look at myself at every chance I get, and I like what I see, but I get absorbed in forehead wrinkles and the pronounced brow bone that remain. Now, I look at mirrors to make sure I never go back. I fill my hand with the same kind of fat, there's just less of it. The stretch marks are still there—tiny ravines of skin stretched paper thin that look like they could tear at any time. Thin is possible; flaws are forever. I don't think I've even moved an inch.

All I heard for a while were faceless "Congratulations!" and "You've lost so much weight! You look so good!" or, like my cousin before a light Thanksgiving dinner, "I didn't even recognize you!" If I could work up the nerve, I would smile and hug them and feel hands on my shoulder blades. I'm the only one who's allowed to question if it's really me.

I never lost the weight of what I saw in the mirror that summer. I just held myself back, never eating or accepting. I know lots of people don't feel quite right in their own skin—or fat for that matter—but they move on in stride. In my eyes, they do not get stuck in their reflection and peer at windows or chrome finish or TV screens looking for someone who isn't there and who they're scared to ever have back. The world stops. When I walk past a window, I indulge myself. I indulge myself. I indulge myself beyond recognition.

I peer at the handsome reflection rather than through the window. There is another me looking back through the same pane. He knows every secret about me; I know every secret about him. He knows what I've gained, and I know what he's lost. I see someone who could've kept the pounds with the lick of an ice cream cone with rainbow sprinkles. Only chance divides past and present. Either one of us could be the one on the outside looking in, haunting the other, both apparitions bound by actions and inactions, the same person underneath the fat. I force myself to relearn, without even slowing my pace, who is stuck inside the glass.