Written On the Body

by Flywoman

Summary

Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there.

Notes

Disclaimer: The title is taken from the novel by Jeanette Winterson, as are several lines, reworked. I also borrowed a phrase from Arundhati Roy. Oh, and Scully isn't mine. More's the pity. *I* would never have given her cancer.

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Is it too late for me to know her?

Scully liked to keep her body rolled up away from prying eyes. But she discouraged physical intimacy out of some erroneous belief in the superiority of mind and spirit over matter, withheld her flesh without any real understanding of its power to betray her. She never suspected that the fear she wouldn't voice collected in sour creases, aggregated in rigid knots in her shoulders, at the nape of her stiff neck. She didn't know that I would have the hands to read her, to translate the Braille of her skin into my own book.

Or maybe she did.

I don't suppose that I will ever know, now. Scully may continue when she has been lost to me, for she was raised to believe in the eternal soul and has clung to that comfort despite her science. But ironically, I, who have seen spirits and been haunted by demons, I know no Hell but the one I
have created for myself here, and no Heaven but the momentary bliss that accompanies a rise
above the everyday self. So when this farce has dragged out long enough, when her physicians
agree to administer that extra measure of morphine to muffle the agony that gnaws her hollow, she
will leave me, and it will be forever.

I do not know if I can bear it.

This thought shames me in the face of so much uncomplaining strength. In her last days of
consciousness, her eyes black with pain, she held my hand, squeezed it softly in an obvious
attempt to console me - me! I have no doubt that if her intubation had not prevented her, she
would have assured me, even then, that she was fine. And not in the old way, that defensive,
distancing mantra designed to keep my concern at bay. No, in these latter days the words would
have been spoken gently, reassuringly, with the courage and faith that had sustained her through
weeks of chemotherapeutic misery, the indignity of loosening hair and radiation burns. But of
course, they weren't.

And they won't be.

And because she can no longer speak to me, or anyone, I have come tonight to find some novel
way of hearing her last words. I would never dare in daylight, when her mother and brothers
encircle her bed, murmuring prayers of muted rage and grief. When the doctors and nurses confer
over her as if she were not actually a human being in the room, or worse, when the young
residents swoop in to dissect her case like so many pale vultures. No, I wait like the reviled
graverobber of old for deep night to shroud my deeds, for I likewise seek knowledge in studies
that many would judge profane.

But how could desecration result from such reverence?

The night nurses know me by now; they wave me on with small smiles and look after me with a
pity that would harden into horror and contempt if they knew my true intentions. I stalk through
the quiet corridors, the low mutter of machinery humming in my bones, until I reach the room.
*Her* room. I close the door softly behind me, rub my palms nervously on my jeans, and
approach the bed with its attendant monitors and IV stands. At the first clear sight of her still,
grave face, I suck in my breath with a stifled groan. I kneel beside her, resting my forehead on the
cool sheet.

Please, Scully, don't leave me…

I am not a medical doctor, but for you I have immersed myself in the murky depths of anatomy
texts, learning the Latin for every tender tissue and brittle bone in your body. Modern medicine is
still little better than witchcraft, doctors believing that to name the thing is to acquire power over it,
to become capable of banishing it. But having found little succor in the words *pituitary
adenoma*, I have taken the complementary approach, hoping that to know you is to save you, to
bind you here. To dam the blood that spills from your skull like a secret.

But I haven't much time.

I get to my feet, take hold of the thin sheet that covers your fragile body and pull it down over the
foot of the bed. My fingers are trembling so much that untying your hospital gown seems to take
forever. Every so often I freeze at the muffled sound of footsteps beyond the door, but these
always fade away down the hall, and we are not interrupted. At last I have your winding sheet
undone and peel it away, revealing you in all your haggard glory. Illness has not destroyed your
beauty, only hallowed and refined it, as raw ore is purified by fire.

My Scully, red and white, bright blood and new milk, flame and frost.
First I press my palm to your breast to verify the reassuring rhythm of your heart. The softness of your skin belies its nature as border, as barrier. Even as I marvel at its texture, I tremble with the mad desire to strip it away, to bare your bones that I might read my future in them. Mad because I cannot face any future that does not include you.

Footsteps again, but they pass.

Your clavicles sing a dirge under my fingertips, their clean lines shining through your translucent skin. The notch where they meet forms a little pool of shadow like a sob. Your ribs stand out in precisely defined rows; as I run my fingers down they rattle like the last train disappearing into darkness. Your belly seems to shrink under my hand, its once taut curve sagging into resignation. The once luxuriant auburn curls have been sadly diminished, and your beloved secret center stinks of sterile despair.

But I have not accepted your fate.

Your strong little legs have lost so much muscle, Scully. I mourn for the past, the firm flesh of your thighs and the tight slash of your tendons, as I trace their skeletal contours in the dim greenish light. How you used to giggle and kick when I dragged my thumbnail up the soles of your feet! I can't help but be disappointed when this act stirs no reflex, no deep-seated muscular memory of our time together. With my thumb and forefinger, I encircle your ankle easily, imagine anchoring you by it to me, to life. Surely the weight of my longing is enough to keep your spirit from rising free of this frail husk.

I do not know how much time passes.

At last I release you, reluctantly, and return to the head of the bed. Your thin, brittle hair spreads out on the pillow as if you are drifting underwater. It suddenly occurs to me that if I were to lift your eyelids I would find two shimmering pearls. I sink to my knees once more, my head whirling, my chest crushed under the revelation: it is too late to pull the dinghy back to shore. You have long since dived of your own accord and sunk down into the peaceful, weightless depths. I think that I will drown myself with weeping. But some of the terrible ache dissolves under the waves of grief, and at last I am able to lift my head and wipe the bitter salt from my eyes.

One final kiss.

With infinite tenderness, I press my lips to your forehead. Your skin is smooth, dry, unfurrowed now by pain or care. A frail pulse ebbs in your temple. The monitors send up a shriek of alarm as your narrow chest rises, falls, stills. Far off I can hear shouts, pounding footsteps, the jarring clang and squeal of carts. I allow myself one last look before the inevitable exercise in brutal futility ensues. Your cracked lips curve slightly in an enigmatic smile.

But I understand.

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