**Body Parts**

Sarah Safsten

1*. Bare bones*

On November 24, 1974, a team of Ethiopian scientists unearthed an extraordinary pile of body parts. More accurately, they discovered the 3.2-million-year-old fossilized remains of Australopithecus afarensis, one of the oldest human ancestors. The skeleton, nick-named Lucy, was just over three feet tall with strong arms and long, curved toes. Human bodies have changed significantly since Lucy’s time. Humans are not the biggest, fastest, or strongest animal, but one physical advantage many human bodies do have (over other animals) is they’re built for long distance running: long legs, upright posture, little body hair, abundant sweat glands. Most four-legged mammals can sprint faster than humans, but over a long distance, humans can outrun almost any animal. Human bodies are also remarkable in that a cubic inch of healthy human bone can support up to 19,000 pounds of weight—pound for pound, it’s stronger than steel.

2. *Costs an arm and a leg*

Walt Whitman once said that humans and animals differ in that animals are not “dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things.” ( *i* ) Humans are a cantankerous, violent, stubborn species, especially regarding property and possessions. For thousands of years, some humans have used the amputation of body parts as punishment for theft. This punishment is still allowed in certain countries; on July 27, 2022, Iranian authorities used a guillotine machine to amputate the fingers of Pouya Torabi, a man convicted of theft. ( *ii* ) Whitman was right; humans are dissatisfied and demented.

3. *Heart on my sleeve*

After a mother’s labored body is split wide open, out from her comes a bloody, yowling creature. Unlike some chicken mothers and sand tiger shark mothers and Komodo dragon mothers, human mothers don’t eat their babies. Instead, they stroke their baby’s soft hair, offer milk. And unlike baby deer and baby horses and baby giraffes, human babies can’t walk or run or jump only minutes after being born. Instead, they suck on their mother’s warm skin. They cry, they eat, they sleep. Mother and baby press their bodies close, rock back and forth, embrace.

4. *Makes my blood boil*

Human bodies are resilient, but also fragile. Essayist Grace Little Rhys wrote, “We stand upon the earth like alabaster vases full of a crimson treasure, sealed to the eye.” ( *iii* ) Many humans find pleasure in breaking these alabaster vases. In watching the crimson liquid inside run out in rivers and puddles. With rocks, water, hammers, electric chairs, rope, gas, knives, guns, planes, humans kill each other. 3.2 million years is a long time to get creative.

5. *On the nose*

I’ve heard that if I live to be 80 years old, I will take almost 700 million breaths in my lifetime. And I recently read that in 80 to 100 days, human bodies regenerate their entire mass of 30 trillion cells. ( *iv* ) Is there an accountant who could audit the sum of my breaths, balance my incoming and outgoing cells? If I had to measure the essence of *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, I might conduct an olfactory inspection. Sans *Drakkar Noir* and deodorant and anti-perspirant and scented shampoos, I think humans smell like salt or like iron. Like adrenaline and dreams. Like cruelty and compassion and family and wildness. But maybe the sum of our breaths or the scent of our essence doesn’t matter. Maybe we only care that we, and our loved ones, keep on breathing.

6. *As I live and breathe*

I’m up before my husband this morning. I watch him sleep next to me. The quilt has fallen off his shoulders during the night—he normally sleeps with it tucked beneath his chin—and the threads of its blue flowers rise and fall on his chest. I study the straight line of his nose. Listen to his exhales. He has only one functioning lung, and now sleeps with a CPAP machine that quietly presses air into his mouth all night. Before the machine, he slept in great, uneven breaths that roared through the house. But now, he sleeps, soft and untroubled. He breathes.

1. Whitman, Walt. “Song of Myself.”
2. “Iranian officials must be held accountable for amputating the fingers of two men.” Amnesty International, July 29, 2022.
3. Rhys, Grace Little. “The Bound God.” 1920. *Quotidiana*. Ed. Patrick Madden. 20 Mar 2015. 01 Dec 2022 <http://essays.quotidiana.org/rhys/the\_bound\_god/>.
4. Christiansen, Jen, and Mark Fischetti. “Our Bodies Replace Billions of Cells Every Day.” *Scientific American*. April 1, 2021.