

Seepage

by Pernilla Manjula Philip

Is it starting now?

Spotting concern in a stranger's eye gifts me a brief sense of arrival. Not the burden of a loved one, but the clean kind of worrying. Grieving as my emotions connect to the earth. The feeling of a warm bath—the warmth of connectivity and interdependence.

I enter the hospital never to leave again. A pulling, vibrating umbilical cord. One cord going to my doctor and another one to my health insurance company. I had never seen it before, but it was always there. Now swollen, brittle and full of bulging blood vessels.

Desperately, grievously torn, I wonder why this is happening to me. Acid blood and a previously unimaginable fight with reason. Facts of forever needing needles, forever being in care. I try to shake it off, turn it around, look for other truths. But my body betrays me.

Tomorrow will be different, I want to believe. But not too different, I hope. As I struggle with the uncertainty of my future, I shamefully slip into jealousy of 'the others.' The people who don't connect to death the way I do. The people who don't care for vaccines but instead long for the revolution. I'm afraid of their revolution, because I need my medicines on time.

I used to think I was blessed to have health. As if it was my belonging. But from where I'm standing it's dark and the smell of fear of the night, fear of the pain, was always there and still lingers strongly. Pre-sickness curtains, to be replaced by the bulky furniture of dis-ease forever living in the middle of my living room.

The best toothbrush in the world (confirmed on the label), *Omar S the best* (I heard), the best health insurance (best wishes). Emotions and illusions, at best. The calming notion of 'the best' works best when tested. Some things fall apart and others rise to its promise.

At the beginning of every calendar year, I receive a postcard from my health insurance company, always with unachievable demands like "stay positive," "be strong" or "7 tips for a

healthy and positive mindset.” That last one was actually from my childhood friend’s mother. It was handed to me shortly after I was diagnosed. I read the cover of the card and smiled politely as I felt my eyes roll to the floor. Her desperate approach, calling upon my health, weighs heavily on me. I look up, and when I meet her eyes, I voicelessly claim my right to be sick.

My rhythm has fallen totally off beat. Off the beaten track and the soil here is so fuckin wet. I cried and cry and, like my own little microcosmos, I lick salty tears off my cheeks and cry them out again.

I slowly unpack myself as a patient. Unwelcome but also strangely familiar. I notice that I’ve always been a patient, or at least a patient on leave.

I heard that, “the wounds are the land for healing,” and that scars are constantly changing as long as the body is alive. I find comfort in thinking that as a forever-patient I never completely heal, and also never stop healing. The body as a beautifully encapsulated, bleeding wound.

Maybe I’ll slow-dance a bit but I’m a lil’ too deep in the mud. I begin to look for my feet. Slowly I find comfort in the resistance. Maybe, maybe I want a chunk of that revolution after all.

The streets for the skies

The first time I visited her house she invited me to sit on her sofa right in the fumes of a still-burning cigarette. These kinds of fumes are much more intense than the filtered kind that come from people’s lungs via their mouths .

A strong smell of ammoniac piss lingered and mixed with the smoke. The ashtray was huge and made of stone. I noticed it was made of stone because I was impressed that it could take the weight of the plastic bag that was looped around it. I’m pretty sure there were diapers inside. Old, funky, stinking adult diapers. I doubt my self-worth when I look back at this. Why did I sit there and smile at her stories?

I wanted to puke, but was paralysed with care. Care for this woman’s story, for her situation and for her enthusiasm to have me in her claws. Trapped on the sofa of a woman I did not yet know.

She was born one year and one week after the Second World War ended. She was the privileged one, the one who was given play while her brother was given fear. He remembers Hitler’s voice on the radio and he will always despise her for all the freedom she was able to have, and for all the security that he constantly needed.

She talked about the street. About the old days. But she never asked me questions. I wonder if she thought it would be intrusive, or if she was simply not interested. Either way, I didn't care enough to break the flow. So I nod and listen.

She talked about the street. About the old days. She showed me the playground that was only for Catholic children and explained that the other children were chased away by the priest. I see an adult hunting a child away from a swing.

When she came back from the hospital, she had an undeniable glow to her skin. The deeply illuminated kind of skin, similar to that of women before they are fully aware of their own pregnancy.

Friends, neighbours and distant relatives became genuinely interested in her now that she was on the verge of dying. Perhaps we all thought she would bring us some clarity. Some near-death enlightenment. Unaware, she offered the rest of us the pleasant illusion of being far from dying. She even made some of us feel alive.

We all wanted to visit her on the day she came back home, myself included. It was a sunny day, so I got her flowers. The default 'brighten up your day—flowers' (sunflowers). But as the days passed, and as she gained new strength, the illusion was broken. People stopped visiting. Myself included.

I was in the shower when her sister came to tell me. I walked downstairs to open the door leaving a trail of wet footprints behind me. It was summer and I felt all nature-fresh to be dripping like that. She touched my wet face with the back of her palm.

She invited me to the funeral with such great pride. Her enthusiasm made it impossible for me to anticipate that it would be so grim. Grim with a decorative border of sunflowers.

Small town fun

I was told it was because I was born prematurely. They say that something flipped and the oxygen ran low inside the incubator resulting in a total loss of my sight. I don't know if this is why I experienced my childhood as miserable. Chances are it would have been no different had I kept my eyesight. I entered adult life with an underlying feeling of not getting enough of what I needed.

I grew up in the Nordic countryside, but our connection to nature was not enough to protect me from being socialised into the narrow passage of womanhood. As a teenager I was sent to live on the outskirts of Oslo, never to return again. It was a full boarding school and my mission was to learn braille.

When I met my husband at a community-organised dance, he had a job at the print-house where he was bullied without defence or retaliation. They bullied him for being dumb and slow. This was partly true—as he was actually slow. But he was also curious in a childlike way—a gift perhaps painful for some to witness. They would pull his chair away as he was about to sit down. Adult men bullying other adult men. This dynamic must be the cradle of patriarchy. the birthplace of chauvinism.

The offset printer was old and used. It had many flaws; some of the manoeuvres could easily crush a limb. It was regularly fixed and subsequently broken. The print-house was an unsafe environment in every way imaginable. Everyone wanted less of that place, including the manager, who built himself into a protected corner of walls and a closed door. The employees only really got to feel his presence during the annual Christmas party. An event that no-one looked forward to, but was made bearable by countless Norwegian schnapps.

But at home it was different. We were gentle to each other. Lots of sweet, playful jokes. And horniness. That holy kind of horniness that comes to you like divine magic. He would tell me what he saw in the pictures and, if there was any text, he would read that out too. Saying it out loud got us both off. He would often change the story so that the woman would have her asshole licked. We never talked about it, but we both knew this was a twist in the plot that we both appreciated.

Un-broken

My cousin met a guy at a backpacker's lodge in Australia. It was a place where people gather in clusters, attract fleas and the bites of various other bugs, build tans and drink Asian beer. They both came from Amsterdam. In their shared hometown, they would probably never have even looked each other's way, but here they spent two days and nights together exploring the area where they had chosen to temporarily settle.

My cousin's new friend had a heavy lisp. A tall symmetrical man who'd had a basic, respectful childhood and would probably have grown up to appreciate himself, if it wasn't for an overworked school teacher, a loving yet deeply angered sister, and those *s's* becoming *th's*. He developed a self-loathing that none of his Dutch therapists had managed to break. One of the few times that he truly felt his right to exist, felt worthy enough to contribute, was as a white man on a backpacking trip.

Backpacking fulfilled his longing to connect to his body. Suddenly, he liked his own smell, and would run his fingers between his toes and smell them. Even though he was ashamed of this, his pleasure was greater than his shame. It became a habit throughout his days as a traveller. A perfect habit for a lightly dressed, flip-flop lifestyle.

When my cousin had been back home for almost a full year, we spent an Easter afternoon at my mom's flat. My cousin and I shared a cigarette in the communal garden and tried to connect as the new adults that we had become.

During the conversation, I expressed my desperate housing need, followed by a short but intense rant about the Amsterdam housing market. Proud to have a simple solution, my cousin told me about a recent post he had seen by the guy he met in Australia. Apparently, he was looking for someone to rent his flat during his next backpacking trip, this time to India. My cousin passed me his details and a few messages later I walked into a flat in a neighborhood completely new to me.

A long and skinny balcony with pigeon shit on white plastic chairs, no oven but instead a tabletop grill, dusty books and a draped sofa. He had obviously just come out of the shower, leaving traces of water and dampened air.

In the bedroom he climbed onto his bed on his hands and knees. He looked over his shoulder as he reached behind a curtain. There was no window behind the curtain, instead a wall covered with Christmas lights. He turned on the lights as he locked his eyes into mine and lisped, "Thith lamp ith for sthex and sthtuff."

Even though I stayed there in the darkest months of the year, I was never able to bring myself to light that lamp.

Caring for money

He looked genuinely surprised as he complimented my language skills. Instead of showing my irritation, I calmly explained that I was born here and that it's my parents who are from Mauritius. Dutch is my first language.

"I'm an artist," I say. I often say this when I feel like worth is threatened. I suppose I hope it makes people think that I'm talented (special) and that this ups my worthiness. Only chosen people can be artists, I let myself believe. My intention was to lead us into a conversation about my chosen life, but instead he flew up from his armchair and headed towards a drawer. "I used to work at a glass factory, and I also made art there," he said, while moving fast across the room. From the cupboard he pulled out a glass bottle in the shape of a dick. Inside were traces of dried-up liquid. Something milky, like Baileys or a White Russian. In his defence, the shape of the bottle made it impossible to clean.

He nicknamed his dog Schatje. "Kom hier, Schatje..." From a distance I could hear him talk with great love and care to the small and energetic dog. The high-pitched voice that he used when talking to her made me imagine him in a different light. It partly melted away the surface of carelessness that I had built up in defence against a harsh workload.

Together we provided an endless rotation of people operating in teams of two. I mostly worked with Sayed. He was in his early forties when he arrived in Zoetermeer from Afghanistan via Iran. His children (Juma, 11, and Gul, 8 going on 9) remember little from Afghanistan. Sayed especially remembers sounds and constantly searches for tastes to take him back. His first language is slowly fading and rapidly outdated.

He mainly worked evenings and Sundays because they paid better. He worked when his kids were at home and was off when they were in school. They had the mutual feeling of evading one another. He missed their struggles and therefore missed the opportunities to show that he cared. Instead, he cared for strangers. The things that make European immigrants feel like immigrants.

While applying for the caretaking job, Sayed mentioned that he could bike, which was a huge overstatement. As we biked from one care home to another, Sayed would occasionally lead the way. Too afraid to let go of his bike's handlebars, he would use his tongue to point out directions. The things that make European immigrants look like immigrants.

Women like flowers

My favourite time of the daily grind is when I'm the only one awake. I look at my daughter while she sleeps, and I can breathe again. The rest of the day I find breathing difficult, sometimes next to impossible. Mornings, days and evenings (and everything in between) I unwillingly fight myself with every task. When my partner suggests we take a few deep breaths together, I hold my breath instead. Angrily, aggressively, passively, alone. Because my "no" is the only thing I have left.

No matter what I wear, my clothes feel itchy, woolen, two sizes too small and too big at the same time. Now imagine those clothes soaked in water, and with a good number of heavy stones in the pockets. Wool, water, stones and depression. Nature's gifts to me.

Becoming a mother was as painful for me as becoming an adult. One cracked my pussy open and the other cracked my heart in two. I take my broken body and go to the supermarket, to work, to pick up and drop off at school. I put one foot in front of the other, and call it walking.

When I became a mother, I grew two new allergies and two hanging tits. The first allergy is towards my partner's horny breath and the other is to stories of happy childhoods. I feel suspicious when people talk to me about their happy childhood. I selfishly wonder what happened to mine. And I grieve, as I resign my ambition of perfection and reluctantly discolour my child's childhood.

Their stories needle me, similarly to the violent suggestion that women are like beautiful flowers. I can see the fields of women-flowers, but can't stop thinking about the fact that all flowers are rooted in dirt.

In the daytime, I long for the early night. The time when everyone is asleep but me and I can finally masturbate. The world that doesn't feel like mine becomes mine for a bit as I witness my skin connect to my insides and become wildly calm. Every time I cum, I feel closer to myself. I wonder if one day I'll be able to wank myself into the old me. I watch Pornhub with my phone on silent. Afterwards, I smell my fingers, feel nice and dirty. Slightly content. I suppose I am a flower after all, rooted in nutritious dirt.

Perfect parted hair. In the middle and out into a fringe. Every hair in harmony creating a highway of control

The first time I encountered burglar bars on windows I thought they were decorations. I feel old but I know I'm younger than most. I'm new to this hemisphere, so the swirling patterns of twisted iron rods appeal to me. Each house has its own style and sometimes the front gates match the bars covering the windows. Like when shoes match your handbag—a fashion consensus.

When he was on night call, he had his gun strapped around his ankle. He smiled when he showed it to me. I don't remember how I felt.

Du-du wall- is that how it's spelled? A popular modular system made of concrete slabs. Walls higher than any human. Adults tell me it's popular because it's "super safe." I feel distrust and shiver from an *isn't-there-something-missing-here?* feeling.

On the edge of the fence, split green glass glows and shimmers. They call it razor fencing. Doorknobs are round here.

If there is enough security you go full circle, and can actually remove the iron burglar bars, giving an illusion of the motherland. The place where people have enough and don't need each other. The place where walking is considered 'nice'.

Hair, control.

Socks, frills.

And the disgusting brown edge that appears on the collar of your white shirt. Nothing in between matters.

My hands have changed. They used to be dark brown but have become beige from the sun and the language that I speak. I hear things that are true during the out-breath and lies in the in-breath. Never day—never night. Forever dusk or dawn.

The good thing about collecting is that when there is enough, I can turn randomness into order. The more bottle caps I have, the more order I can create. There is something violent yet fulfilling about sorting in this way. Putting things in places where I believe they belong.

It's her birthday. My sisters and I make sure to put the balloons in strategic places. This way they don't burst from the wind pushing them against the intentionally sharp points of the gate.

Sleeping bodies in a room shut with burglar bars. I visit several vaults. Awakened and asleep. I can easily get in, but can't be selective. I try to match my plans with the near past. They call them dreams but they are my plans. They give me the control of calmness. I'm always scared but never worried.

Saying no to fear is, inherently, saying no to love. It's like those knuckle tattoos, even though I haven't seen any over here.

My school uniform feels similar to my sister's hoop-hockey uniform. Memories from the place I call home—the warm land where it always snows and sometimes rains.

The labour of care is unavoidable in all human lives and exists in a flux between care and carelessness. Looking at the complexity of unpaid as well as paid labour of caretaking, I want to call attention to some of the many invisible aspects interlaced within.

In this text I wish to have taken you with me, via fantasies and experiences mixed together, through an amalgamation of my personal experiences, from having a sick body to being a caretaker, to myself as well as to others.

Through erasing the dichotomies of the sick and the healthy, dependency and interdependence, and self-care and communal-care, I intend to question kinship in order to re-introduce it in its original, purely fluid form.

Thank you for reading!

Heartily big-up your chest, to my inspirational web of beings.

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